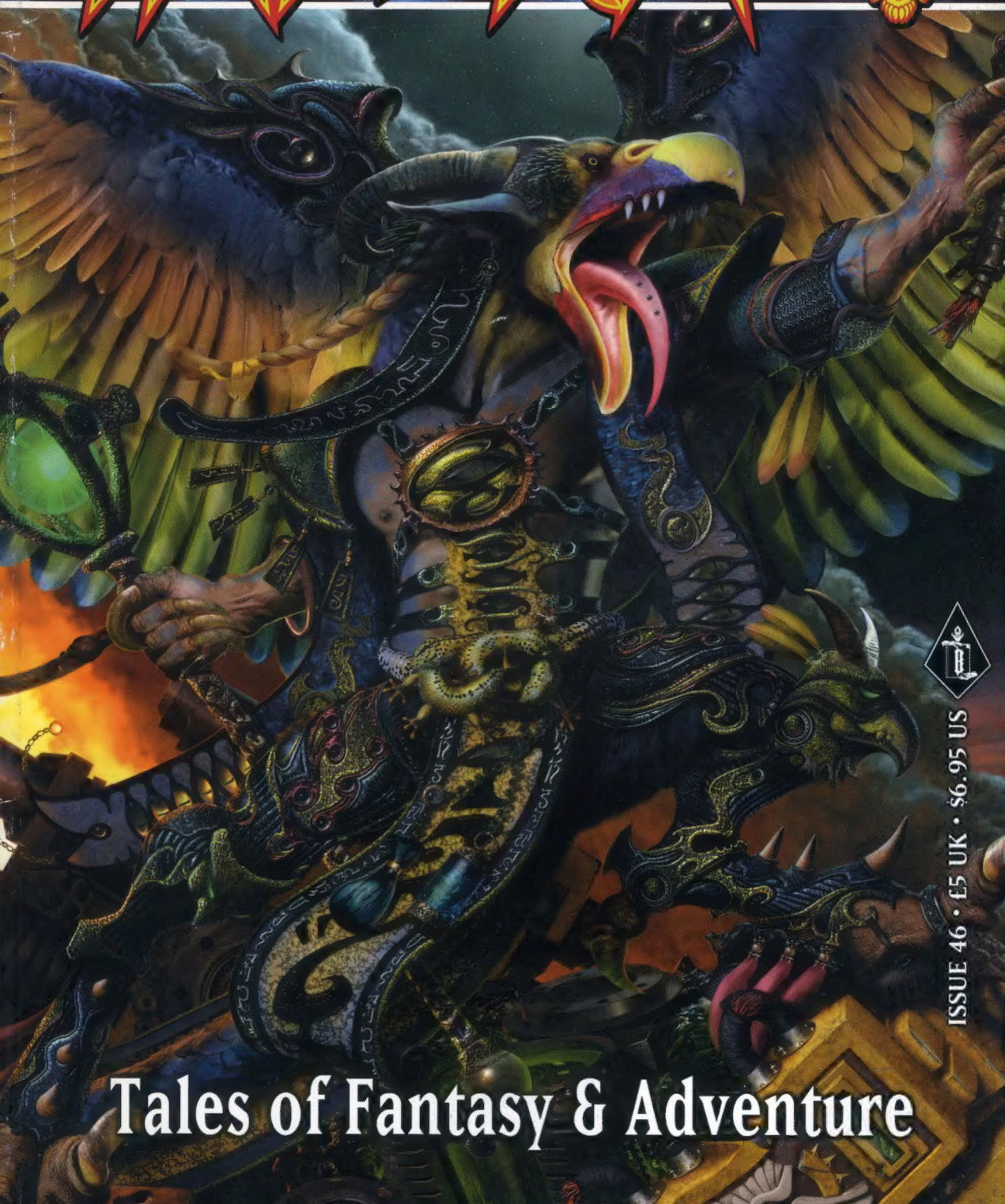


# INFERNO!



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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure



# INFERNO!

**S**O ANOTHER UK Games Day has come and gone and now that I've had time to recover I'd like to thank everybody who came to down to the National Indoor Arena in Birmingham on that rainy Sunday in early October.

It was great to meet so many people who are enthusiastic about the Black Library and our fiction and to answer all your questions: everything from when the next Ravenor novel is released to the correct pronunciation of Ciaphas Cain (the Ci is pronounced Si by the way). I'm sure everybody had as much fun as the Black Library staff and guests and we hope to see you all again next year.

I just hope Dan Abnett has finished signing by then!

**O**NE OF THE questions I was asked at Games Day was how do we select the stories for each issue of Inferno!? Well, without the benefit of a sorting hat, the editorial team have to go through our

list of commissioned stories and come up with a suitable mix of tales for both Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000.

The tricky part is always finding the perfect balance and not having too many stories that focus on the same type of hero or villain.


Two of the stories up for consideration this issue were *Menshad Korum* and *Power, Corruption and Lies* – the first is from the eldar point of view with a dark eldar supporting character whereas the latter is a tale of dark eldar machinations and infighting. Not wanting to focus too heavily on the dark eldar, we had to make a call between one or the other. *Menshad Korum* got the nod purely because of the fact that the eldar haven't featured in these pages for far too long.

The choice of fantasy stories for this issue gave us a little more pause for thought. *Sickhouse* and *Hetzau's Follies* are both very similar in terms of theme – the tension between the followers of Shallya and Nurgle and

their diametric opposition in terms of the Warhammer world. After much debate we decided to run them both on the basis that the same themes are handled in completely different ways. And besides, Brunner is an already established character whereas Reiner Hetzau is a soon-to-be established character that we thought we'd share with our loyal Inferno! readers before anybody else. *Valnir's Bane*, the first Reiner Hetzau novel, should be available as you read this and the second book in the series, *The Broken Lance*, will be on the shelves just in time for Christmas next year.

And to answer a query from another Games Day attendee: no, I don't think you're right about Carl Thonius!

See you in two months' time.



Christian Dunn  
Editor

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# MENSHAD KORUM

Story by

# CS GOTO

*Behind our consciousness lies a profound abyss, about which we riddle and dance through the Paths of our kind. The Aspects of Khaine are sprinkled around the rim like garrisons of our sanity. The exarchs are the champions of our souls, keeping the darkness at bay. Beware the Menshad Korum; the hunter who stalks himself. Although trapped in the Path of the Warrior, this exarch owes his soul to no Aspect and knows not who he is. None is closer to Khaine than the Lost Warrior, none closer to the abyss in our souls.*

**On the Transfiguration of Exarchs**  
— Seer Calmainoc, Ulthwé

**T**HE RICOCHET CAUGHT him in the back of his head. Surprise flickered over his face as the cacophony of battle was arrested by the shock. Sudden silence. Arbariar discarded her shuriken pistol and drew the crackling chainsword into both hands, holding it vertically at her right shoulder in the death-stance of the Striking Scorpions. Vlalmorch fell forward onto his knees, his eyes wide in disbelief and his mouth working silently. A trickle of blood snaked its way round his neck, hissing with toxicity. His fusion gun clattered onto the shimmering wraithbone deck as it dropped lifelessly from his hand. The exarch lifted his gaze into Arbariar's face as he collapsed to the ground at her feet, motionless.

*That Soul is Mine.* The voice oozed into Arbariar's mind, riddling her thoughts and curdling her intent. She paused, unsure.

*Take the stone, and let's get out of here,* came the voiceless words of Bureea. Arbariar could feel the urgency in her daughter's thoughts and she snapped out of her nauseous reverie, stooping quickly. Rolling Vlalmorch over onto his back, she pushed her delicate fingers under his armour, where they quested and danced.

*They are coming.*

*I know.* Arbariar worked quickly, teetering on the edge of composure like a feather falling onto a blade. She could hear the footfalls of Vlalmorch's Kinsmen, the Bloodguard of the House of Saeemrar. She could feel them getting closer, chipping away at the fabric of time in their burning haste. There was an electric panic in the air that made her fingers fumble and twist: where did he keep his stone... where is it?

*It is Mine.*

*They will kill us. This will be the end of us all.  
Hurry. We must leave... now.*



**A** BH AHG VAKARUM!' Quereshir shouted the opening mantra as he raced down the corridor. He held a flamer in both hands, pumping it from side to side as he ran. The Kinsmen flooded out in his wake, like a blast of flame from an afterburner. Their golden helmets spiked into the air in front of them, splintering off a heartbeat of time and sending them roaring into the fractional future.

Quereshir was fastest, driven by fear and drawn by the silence that had suddenly befallen his father's thoughts. He was already through the great doors of Saeemrar's sanctum before their flaming, molten substance had fully withdrawn into the cold wraithbone walls.

The Kinsmen arrived only moments later, but Quereshir was already in a deathhaze, spinning in exquisite splendour, sending gyring flames into the hearts of each shadow that swam and flickered around the room. Using the momentum of his spin, he kicked into the air and spiralled over the prostrate corpse of his father, bathing the Kinsmen in fire before landing, kneeling next to his father's head. The flamer died in his hands and the Kinsmen each dropped to one knee, flames still licking at the fiery orange of their armour.

*We come too late.* Quereshir's thoughts were uneven, as though he were stifling each one, fearing that they were weapons. Lifting his fingers gently from the exposed skin on the front of his father's neck, he looked up at his Kinsmen. Lord Vlalmersch, Menshad Korum Exarch and chieftain of the Saeemrar Wild Riders is dead. The Kinsmen bowed their heads, transforming the scene into a sea of orangine golds. It was as though they were themselves the flames of this great House.

Quereshir glanced round the chamber. The shadows had returned, but nothing could have survived his cleansing. There were no traces of intruders, not even the psykic-echo of their dark intent. The Kinsmen were

forcing down their shame and anger, glaring into the dizzying sheen of the polished wraithbone at their feet. Finally, Lureal, oldest of the Bloodguard lifted his head. *Who is responsible for this?*

Horror gripped Quereshir as he carefully removed his father's blood-red breastplate. *I do not know but, by Khaine, they will pay for it with their souls.*



**Y** OU'RE SURE?' 'Quite sure. This shape is little known and difficult to master. No other squadrons use it.'

Quereshir toyed with the microscopic disc under the closeseer, flipping and turning it so that light glinted from each of its venomous edges. Even he could see that the workmanship was truly breathtaking – the shuriken had been rendered into a tiny scorpion, its tail wrapped round into its chelicerae claws, leaving the pedipalps pinching outwards, forming a perfect barbed circle. He had found the tiniest of shards wedged into one of the pillars in his father's chamber and, sure enough, its exact inverse was missing from the sting of this micro-arachnid.

'A shuriken pistol would have to be fired at very close range even to scratch a wraithbone pillar,' advised the wraithsmith.

Quereshir considered the aging elder in front of him. 'Are you suggesting that the ricochet was a deliberate tactic?'

'That would be my deduction, yes.'

Even without the wraithsmith's insight into the unique shape of the projectile, Quereshir would have recognised the assailant's tactical signature. Only the Striking Scorpion Aspect Warriors were adept enough at close quarter combat to bounce a shuriken off a pillar into the back of their adversary's head. But the Aspect temples had little time for the volatile politics of the Wild Rider clans. Only the Scorpionida Wild Riders of Saim-Hann, whose chieftain had mastered the Aspect Arts of the Striking Scorpions long years before during her time on the Path of the Warrior, stung their projectiles with mandiblasters psykotoxins.



He was taken in combat then, not shot in the back? Lureal's question bolted into Quereshir's mind, forceful and relieved simultaneously. Quereshir turned to face the staunch Kinsman.

'Yes, my old friend, but there is more to this than a chieftain's honour-duel. We must speak privately.' The son of Vlalmerch had control of his rage now; his torrential emotions were focussed into a fine stream of calculation. 'Follow me.'

The two clansmen bowed slightly to the wraithsmith, who nodded a gentle response, and took their leave. They walked soundlessly from the workshop, sharing neither words nor thoughts. Quereshir could feel Lureal's fierce resolve as it flooded the space around them, giving the two eldar extra gravity as they walked, slowing them almost to the loping pace of the mon-keigh. But Quereshir was distracted by his own private thoughts and even the power emanating from the Bloodguard captain could give him no reassurance, although he knew that the old eldar would sacrifice his very soul to avenge this evil.

As the flaming doors of the Saeemrar sanctum melded together behind them, the two clan-brothers folded themselves onto the reds and golds of the cushions that covered the council chamber. 'They took his waystone,' said Quereshir levelly. Lureal nodded slowly, with repulsed understanding. They sat in silence for seven heartbeats, bringing themselves into synchronisation, intertwining their souls. They closed their eyes and called to the other Kinsmen.

*Blood Runs,  
Anger Rises,  
Death Wakes,  
War Calls!*



**S**OMEWHERE IN THE lashes of the Eye of Terror, Lelith Hesperax flicked open her eyes with a slow smile, the serrated perfection of her teeth glinting lightlessly. The intricate blackness of the seer-amplification chamber wove itself back into reality around her, ripples of sha'iel dissipated and morphed into the calligraphic runes that settled into the pearlescent

darkness of the walls. The chamber was never fully in a single reality, and the runes continued to slip, mingle and twine like snakes of oil, hungry to be released into the warp once again.

The wych queen rose from her meditation without a sound, her movements clothed in shadow and sickly grace. Echoing her motion, an imperceptible doorway fizzled out of existence from the curving wall behind her. Light streamed in, silhouetting a tall, slim figure who knelt in wait. Lelith revolved to face the inquiries of her underling, but Yhuki knew better than to verbalise her questions before the great wych had already offered the answers.

*The Soul has been Taken. It has Begun.*

The subtle yet emphatic force of Lelith's thoughts made Yhuki reel. *Very good*, was all that she could manage in response, as Lelith glided through the space that separated the two wyches. *Not Good, just Inevitable, as though common to all the myriad futures.* Lelith swept passed her servant, her long hair caressing Yhuki's naked shoulders and fanning into a wake behind her. Yhuki fought to resist the need to touch the queen's legs as they slid through the eddying air at her shoulder. She knew that to do so would send her soul screaming into the abyss of sha'iel, where it would be consumed by daemons or perhaps by Slaanesh himself. She had heard the whispered rumours of the queen's pact with the Satin Throne.

*But it might be worth it?* Yhuki could not tell whether those were her own thoughts, and she left her hands clasped in front of her, right fist enveloped by left palm, in the traditional deference of the Hesperax Retinue of the Dark Eldar. *Very Good*, came the thoughts again, *for there is a Fine Line between the Path of Damnation and the Road to Hell.*



**T**HE GOLD AND red armour of the exarch lay ceremoniously upon the altar, its arms pulled across its chest. The image was pregnant with echoes of the Fire Dragon Aspect, from which Vlalmerch had fled as a Lost Warrior, the Menshad Korum. During his time as an Aspect Warrior for the Dragons, Vlalmerch had embraced

his fate as the perpetual warrior, trapped into the glorious path of Khaine, the Bloody-Handed God. But, bursting with the pride of his clan, his soul had not been at peace in the Temple of Fire and the exarch had fled the discipline of the flame, returning to his clan as the greatest warrior the House of Saeemrar had ever known. Many eldar in this proud house had walked the Path of the Warrior for various periods in their lives, but Vlalmerch was the first to return to the clan as an exarch. He was their natural leader, inspiring awe, fear, and respect in equal measures. And with him came the flaming signature of the Aspect that he left behind – the Saeemrar gloried in his fire.

'The Path of the Exarch is lonely and savage, but it brings greatness to our Kin and might to our flames. It is the Unparalleled Path, striking with fear and awe at our very souls.' As he spoke, the clan's seer surveyed the assembled Saeemrar, each kneeling, fierce with injured pride. It was an inspiring vision, with hundreds of blood-red helmets bowed in honour, filling the glistening temple with visions of fire. At the very front of the congregation were the dazzling golds of the Kinsmen – the clan's Wild Riders and the chieftain's Bloodguard. Swirling in the air around them and seeping up the three steps toward the altar was the flow of shame and the passion for vengeance that these chosen few exuded. We were not there. The air was thick and syrupy, sick with muttered promises of death. And there, amidst the gyring soup of intense emotion, sending eddies and ripples into the psykofield that swamped them all, knelt Quereshir, resplendent in his golden battle-armor, blood red burning on his shoulder guards and in his eyes.

The seer considered Quereshir closely, reaching out with her thoughts and attempting to divine his intent. Never before had Ehliji seen such a maelstrom of emotion erupt from the bereaved. She could see that the son of Vlalmerch was struggling to maintain his composure, battling against his hateful anger, hammering his gaze into the gleaming floor of the temple as though fearing that it might annihilate anything else it touched.

'Because of the horror buried deep in the soul of the exarch, the seers of Saim-Hann have never permitted them access to the infinity circuit of our craftworld, wherein

swim the souls of our ancestors, held from the grasp of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Precarious enough is the existence of the eldar. Instead, the fearsome power and ineffable wisdom etched into the exarch's waystone is added to those who were once the exarch before him. The armour of the exarch is justly exalted, for it bears within it the ageless might of eldar past; its breast is studded with the colours of their waystones. It contains its own infinity circuit, a spirit pool, a haven for the soul of Vlalmerch. Now, for the first time in our long history, the passing of an exarch is also the passing of our Saeemrar chieftain; our clan should be enshrined with him in the spirit pool of this armour, granting us immortality and honour immeasurable.'

A wave of imagery flooded into the minds of the congregation, erupting from the prone armour of the exarch like a psychic volcano. Flickering pictures flashed across their eyes, depicting the innumerable manifestations of this Menshad Korum exarch over the millennia. At first there was Vlalmerch towering over the sprawling figure of a Hesperax wych, and then the images whirled into the ancient past. The Fire Dragons watched their exarch lead them from their home world, as it became overwhelmed by the insanity of the Fall, forging a new future for the Saim-Hann aboard this immense craftworld. And then, in the dimness of a half-forgotten past, they watched the moment at which the first Aspect Warrior was transfigured into the exarch that would always infuse this armour, as he vanquished the Necron Lord Ardoth and this retinue of Pariahs. The soul of each great warrior, enwrapped in their waystones to hide them from the thirsty quest of Slaanesh, lay embedded in the ancient armour of the exarch. The exarch was battle incarnate.

Ehliji could sense the pride swelling in the hearts of the clansmen and she muttered a silent prayer that it would overcome the anger in Quereshir. The sons of Saim-Hann were moved more easily by honour and pride than were any of the other eldar whom Ehliji had served. It had been amongst the first of the craftworlds to escape after the Fall, and it carried the legacy of that desperate flight in its very soul. But the son of the exarch showed no signs of movement, his gaze was held by something hidden deep within the wraithbone deck, as though he

could see plans emerging out of its profound darkness. Ehliji looked directly at him, hoping to prize him out of his deathly trance, but he was as closed to her as he would have been to a mon-keigh. *You are not alone. You must listen. There are things more important than the individual's loss. The eldar must be above such things. The future is splintered and unclear. We cannot afford needless bloodshed.*

*Tell that to the Scorpionidas!* Quereshir's retort thundered into Ehliji's mind, staggering her. She pushed out her left hand to steady herself against the altar as the blast threatened to throw her from her feet. Lureeal stole a glance up from his reverence, unable to ignore the immense exchange of energy that seered through unseen dimensions above his head. He caught a glimpse of horror on the seer's face before composure retook her and the ceremony continued.

'Lord Vlalmerch burned brightest of his generation, honouring his family and our clan as he took the tremendous burden of this armour. He left us and walked the Path of the Warrior for three hundred years, becoming master of the Aspect Arts of the Fire Dragons. We all gloried in his great victories,' Ehliji's tone softened, 'but none more so than he. As the time for his transition to another of our great Ways drew near, he lost himself, never to leave the Warrior Way, and we were saved for another generation. But he did leave the Fire Dragons – Vlalmerch grasped the hand of the Bloody-Handed God, bringing him into the heart of our house, and we lived our lives around his horror. There is no sacrifice greater or more terrifying than that made by our chieftain.'

'Who will wear the armour now?' Hundreds of faces lifted their eyes from the ground, searching for the origin of that voice. The Kinsmen were on their feet, standing before the altar. Lureeal, the eldest and most venerated captain of the Bloodguard, who had once journeyed the Path of the Warrior for five hundred years, stood forward of the group, his armour shimmering with immaculate honour. 'Without our chieftain we are dishonoured. But without the exarch we are weak – we have grown dependent on his strength. Another must be found.' Murmurs of affirmation rippled through the congregation. Lureeal is right. He should take the armour.

'The armour of an exarch cannot be conferred according to the whims of a Wild Rider clan, but only by a seer of an Aspect Temple. In any case, none of you are on the Path. There is no one here who is ready. None of you are yet lost to yourselves.'

'Seer Ehliji, I am prepared,' answered Lureeal, meeting the seer's gaze so that she might see the fire in his eyes.

'There is no preparation, Captain Lureeal. There is no will. There is only the future, and this is not your path. Your offer does you great credit, but this is not a matter for a warrior to choose – such is the Way of Damnation. The exarch simply is, although he may not yet know it.'

Lureeal bowed his head, acknowledging the seer's wisdom.

I will take my father's armour!

Ehliji gasped as the thought struck her.

'I will take my father's armour,' came Quereshir's voice, gentle, firm and quiet. The clansmen of the Saeemrar searched for this new voice with their eyes as the Kinsmen parted to reveal Quereshir still kneeling at the altar, his attention still caught in the depths of his thoughts, gazing into the wraithbone.

*You must not. You are not on the path. You are not yet lost. Your future holds many paths and possibilities. You must not will yourself onto this path, or you will be as lost to us as you will be to yourself. It is not a question of choice.*

'I am lost without him. His death has fixed my path. It is set. The armour is mine.' Rising to his feet, Quereshir climbed the steps to the altar, where he turned to address the congregation. Ehliji stepped back, drawing in her breath, keeping a space between them, fighting to conceal her horror.

'My warrior brothers, Lord Vlalmerch was indeed the greatest of us and the most terrible. There was never one more deserving of this armour than he. Countless enemies have cowered before his flames. Entire planets were rent asunder and starships rendered to dust if they dared to oppose him. Behind him, the Saeemrar Wild Riders of Saim-Hann have bathed in the flames of glory and destruction.

'Kinsmen – my father's Bloodguard – there are none who know better than you the single-minded passion and art with which he flowed into battle, scything into combat on



his ruby jetbike, dispensing melta and death to our enemies.

'Yet, my friends, it is true that the soul of Lord Vlalmerch cannot blend into the honour and glory of our craftworld's ancient infinity circuit. However, neither will it swim in the infinities of this armour's spirit pool. His waystone will not adorn the breast of the next exarch. For he is lost to us, as he was lost to himself.

'Our lord did not die in a chieftain's honour battle, as befits the traditions of Saim-Hann's Wild Riders. He was assassinated in his chamber within these temple walls, and his waystone stolen. I have taken the counsel of the wraithsmiths and of my soul, and I know that our chieftain was killed by another eldar of Saim-Hann.'

Quereshir paused to let the significance of this accusation hit home. Feuds between the Wild Rider squadrons were not unknown – the eldar of other craftworlds found the Saim-Hann barbaric because of them – but this was the first time that one had involved an exarch, for whom such games served no purpose. In general, the Aspect Temples kept out of such political machinations, although eldar new to the Path of the Warrior would sometimes indulge in petty rivalries or honour matches. These were calculated as tests of skill, as rites of passage on the road to mastery of the Aspect arts. Such tests always remained behind the closed doors of the temple. But the Menshad Korum was not part of any temple.

Deaths were extremely rare, both within Aspect Temples and in the conflicts between Wild Rider clans; behind these apparently lethal competitions lay the unspoken unity of Saim-Hann and the profoundly protective angst of the eldar race itself, which balances on the edge of extinction. The squadrons from the Saeemrar and the Scorpionidas had been rivals for millennia, but they were also the closest of allies whenever the craftworld of Saim-Hann went to war. Together they had crushed the vile wyches of Hesperax and driven their remnants into the Eye of Terror. That had been Vlalmerch's finest hour, but it was more than a century ago.

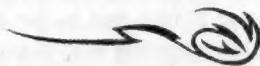
'I am all that is left of Lord Vlalmerch. With my body, I will imbed his memory within the psykoplastic of the exarch's armour. His glories will live on through me and, at the time of my passing, through my own

waystone. We may have lost his soul, but his memory will never die. He was our chieftain, and we should decide the fate of his armour – the Fire Dragons have no claim to him.'

A great cheer arose from the Wild Riders in the sanctum of the Saeemrar, 'SAEEMRAR!', sending thunder stampeding through the corridors and passages that led from the great flaming gates. The sea of reds and golds pulsed with life, as though unified by a single organic purpose, the pride of the warriors whipped into a frenzy of proportions unique to the eldar race. The cheer went up again, 'SAEEMRAR!', this time accompanied by jets of flame from the Kinsmen, who showered the congregation with hungry light. The conflagration throbbed with fire and with the rhythmic chanting of the Menshad Korum exarch's new name: 'SAEEMRAR!'

'And now,' cried the voice of Quereshir over the tumultuous din, 'the Saeemrar exarch must prepare for craftwar!' With voices as one, the Wild Rider host began their chant to Khaine, the Bloody-Handed God.

'Blood Runs,  
'Anger Rises,  
'Death Wakes,  
'War Calls!'



**'W'**E MUST TAKE the waystone to the core.' Arbariar held Vlalmerch's soul in her hand, tightly gripped into a fist. She could feel its icy pulse repelling her fingers, as if disgusted by her touch. An intense wave of pity flooded into her as she considered what her great rival had denied himself, and she tightened her fist around him. The fool.

'There will be resistance. Not only the Saeemrar, but the whole of Saim-Hann will seek to prevent this.' As always, Bureea was right. It did not take the gifts of a seer to realise the peril of the Scorpionidas. They had murdered an exarch of their own craftworld, and now they sought to cast his soul into the infinity circuit, where his dark and deathly pollution might condemn the spirit pool to centuries of despair and bloody misdirection. The war-cries of an exarch, any exarch, fixated on death, amplified by the

teeming millions of souls in the ancient circuit, risked flaring a beacon for the minions of the Satin Throne. The hint of such an awesome prize might even lure Slaanesh himself.

It was not for nothing that the Council of Seers had prevented the assimilation of the exarchs for millennia. The infinity circuit must be kept pure, for it was the last haven of a dying race, the only hope for the eldar's future. As each of the craftworlds navigated the distant stretches of the galaxy, they collected the souls of their dead into their hearts, keeping them from the clutches of the unspeakable daemons at their heels. Stealth and movement were vital to survival. The peripatetic craftworlds never came together for very long, fearing that the immense concentrations of eldar souls would lure Slaanesh out of sha'iel to consume them. The craftworlds could not risk anything that might endanger their spirit pools.

Arbariar looked into her daughter's eyes, momentary uncertainty flickering in her gaze. Bureea saw her mother's hesitation, 'Yes, this deed is greater than us, greater even than Saim-Hann. Our action sends myriad new futures lancing into possibility, each one more glorious than the present, sickening pathways of our weak craftworld. We will bring the volcanic wrath of the Saeemrar and suffer agonies of shame, but in the dimness of future realities they will sing of our virtue and truth. We will be exalted in our suffering.'

The seer's words soothed Arbariar's anxiety as she knelt before the Striking Scorpions altar, buried deep within the sanctum of the Scorpionidas. Arbariar had walked the Aspect Path of the Striking Scorpions for many long years before finally transcending the Path of the Warrior and returning to her clan; a fragment of her soul remained in that embattled past, and she devoted part of each day to the rites of the Striking Scorpions, just as other eldar might continue to practice sculpture or poetry even after having left the Path of the Artist. The altar was a reminder of an unforgettable past.

Intricate, artful red webs wove their way through the deep green of the steps beneath her, aspiring toward the altar where they congealed into a crescendo of arachnids, spilling over the magnificent scorpion throne, swamping its blood red form with the seductive threads of their genus. The

patterns seemed to swim and float over the wraithbone, dancing and luring the eyes as though enchanted by some dark power. Arbariar had lost herself in this hypnotic web aeons ago, trapped by its apparent eternities. Now she contemplated its depth for a long moment everyday.

Climbing into the throne of the Scorpionidas chieftain, Arbariar turned to face her daughter. 'Lord Vlalmersch was once my honoured battle-brother, until, at the point of our powerblades, the Hesperax separated us, drawing us into her darkness, seducing us at the moment of our victory. That was long ago, but the darkness has grown powerful in Saim-Hann, and now is the time to act. The darkness draws us into war, and we will riddle it with shimmering flecks of death.'

Bureea bowed deeply to her mother, closed her eyes, and called for the Scorpionidas to assemble in the great hall of their sanctum. In the warithbone of the craftworld infrastructure, she could feel the pounding of warriors responding to her voiceless call.



**L**ELITH HESPERAX reclined into her throne, sending delicate jets of blood spraying into Yhuki's face. Bones in the throne creaked gently under her weight and the flesh shifted in desperate need to bring comfort. Lelith closed her eyes and pushed her arms above her head, stretching her tall, gracefully curving body, laying full length as the thronelings rushed to form a bed, aching for a touch of her skin. Yhuki knelt at her queen's feet, biting down on her own tongue with her filed and sharpened teeth. A trickle of blood seeped out from the corner of her mouth, and she cast her tongue around her lips lasciviously.

*All is proceeding as you have foreseen it, my queen.*

*Of course.*

*The eldar are preparing for craftwar. There will be many souls to harvest. Should we prepare to depart?*

*No. The Time for harvest has not yet Come – we are still sowing. Patience.*

*You do not inspire patience in me,* thought Yhuki involuntarily, her tongue still poised with its tip on her upper lip.

*Then do not be Patient.* Yhuki shivered with shame and desire, searching her mind for the origins of that familiar voice. Her thoughts turned in on themselves, clouding her vision as she searched for herself, trying to steady her soul before it was lost. But it was too late. She could only watch in detached, horrified anticipation as her hand slid across the base of the throne and her fingers crawled onto the skin of Lelith's exquisite calf, picking their way between the complex straps of black psykoplasic that snaked their way up the queen's legs. Lelith let out a breath of pleasure and reached down to Yhuki, drawing her face up along her body, balancing her chin atop a single impossibly fine fingernail. Yhuki could feel a piercing pain were Lelith's nail touched her neck, but she was enraptured.

*Look down.* The thought appeared directly in the core of Yhuki's mind, and she obeyed without question or hesitation. She let her eyes caress the breathless contours of the queen's form as they extended their gaze down to her delicately barbed feet. There, lying across the base of the throne, blood gushing from an egregious wound on its neck, was her own decapitated body. Horror sprang from the depths of her soul, but she had no breath to scream. Her eyes widened in terror as she cast her gaze back into the infinite and irresistible darkness of the queen's face for the last time.

Lelith slowly withdrew her finger from within the sinewy mess of Yhuki's neck, and the last spark of light vanished from the eyes of her devoted servant. This soul she would offer to the Satin Throne, its twisted and unrestrained hedonism would please the dark lord of pleasure and fulfil the continuing terms of their ancient compact. *There is a Fine Line between the Path of Damnation and the Road to Hell,* repeated Lelith. Yhuki had just crossed it.

Lying back into her bloody throne, Lelith Hesperax lamented the weakness of her kind – so easily moved to emotion, so easily led astray and lost from their paths. Even the mon-keigh, a prey species, showed greater balance. A little over a century had passed since her mighty starship had been driven from the expanses of open space by the Wild Riders of Saim-Hann. It had been an epic

battle, with the reds, greens and golds of the Saim-Hann dashing themselves against the immovable darkness of her wyches; jetbikes, vypers and riders screaming into insanity before they could even engage with the Forces of Strife. Her Reaver jetcycles, clothed in the blackness of space, had whipped Saim-Hann into a frenzy of death, as the craftworld's great guns gyrated and spun ineffectively, loosing volleys of death into their own warriors.

Then the tide turned; two squadrons had banded together to face the black mass of wyches and dark riders, and between them they had driven Lelith back into her own ship. They pursued her on their jetbikes, weaving through the corridors and passages of her flagship releasing bolts of melta and sprays of fire, showering shuriken and scything bladed slaughter as they flew. Hundreds of wyches had fallen. The souls of thousands of dark eldar warriors were lost into the sha'iel, as Slaanesh and his daemons gorged themselves. The Reavers were annihilated by the combined power of the Saemrar and the Scorpionidas Wild Riders.

Lelith breathed a sickly and pungent laugh as she recalled the two chieftains who had towered over her on her own battle bridge, their blades running with blood focussed on her neck as she lay defeated on the floor, prostrate in ghastly submission. *How Pathetic are the Eldar,* she hissed into soundless dimensions. She had been defeated. The chieftains could have finished her with a single sting or burn. But one had turned to rejoin the fight in the ghostly labyrinth of her ship, lost in its single-minded pursuit of combat, leaving the other the honour of her soul. Lelith had squirmed and contorted her form, writhing on the shimmering command deck. The remaining chieftain had hesitated, something stirring deep within its sharply focussed and unbalanced soul. Lelith beckoned to its thoughts, seducing it with dances of blackness and promises of an infinity of battle and death. She had filled the warrior's soul with her darkness and watched the waystone on its colourful breastplate blink into a glistening black.

For a century, Lelith had waited patiently for the moment to come, relishing the inevitable determinism of her vision as though it were battle itself. Just as they had united to confront her, so she would divide



them to confront each other. Craftwar would bring her thousands of souls; enough to placate the Satin Throne for centuries.



**T**HE COLD PLATES felt uncomfortable against his skin, as though they had been specifically designed to cause irritation – a kind of ritual penance for the violence encased in their powerful forms. Quereshir rolled his shoulders, trying to adjust the fit of the gleaming psyko-plastic, but the armour seemed to resist his every movement.

The sanctum was fiercely hot, with flames dancing up the walls, defining a perimeter around the sacred space in the heart of the House of Saeemrar. Quereshir had attended his father here many times before. Now Lureeal attended him. Kneeling in deference at the feet of his new lord, Lureeal held up the magnificent golden helmet of the exarch's armour, the final piece in the intricate jigsaw. Reflections of flames flickered and sparkled off the perfectly smooth, curving surface.

Quereshir nodded his acknowledgement to the veteran captain and lifted the helmet from his hands, fitting it neatly over his own head and sealing it into the shoulders of the armour with a slight pressure. Immediately the suit began to shift and move. It twitched and thrashed, forcing Quereshir into impossible contortions, his flailing limbs smashing Lureeal from his delicate deference and sending him rolling across the floor into the flames against the wall.

The armour was sealing itself against the world, and Quereshir could feel the air being forced out of the pockets in the interior. It was shrinking, clinging to his body, wrapping itself around his face and suffocating him. All the time it forced him into random, energetic movements until he was gasping for breaths that he could not take. He tried to call out to Lureeal, but could make no sound. He reached out with his mind, but found his thoughts could not penetrate the psyko-plastics that enveloped him. He was utterly alone and completely imprisoned, dying desperately.

Lureeal watched in horror as Vlalmerch's son threw himself around the sanctum, smashing himself against the walls and the shimmering wraithbone pillars. He had been with Vlalmerch when he had first donned the armour of the exarch, and it had not been like this. The suit had just hissed into place – a perfect fit.

Quereshir could hear voices whispering in his mind and could feel the icy tendrils of the psyko-plastic reaching through his skin, piercing his suffocation with bright moments of pain. The whispering grew louder and the voices multiplied. He tried to shake his head, wanting to empty the voices from his ears, but he could not move. There was chanting: *Saeemrar, Saeemrar, Saeemrar*. And there were questions spinning around his head, stirring his mind into a nauseating vortex: *What do you want? Who will you be? What do you want? Who will you be?*

In a flash it was over. The destructive, erratic movements flowed into a graceful dance – an elegant and faultless training form from the repertoire of the most advanced Aspect Warriors. The armour hissed finally into perfect fit, clinging to every fraction of Quereshir's skin. The whispering voices in his mind continued, but they had retreated into the background and Quereshir found his own thoughts once again.

Lureeal looked on in relief and then stooped into a deep bow.

The exarch spoke. 'I am the Menshad Korum.'



**Q**UERESHIR AND HIS Kinsmen folded themselves into the wall on either side of the emerald, crystalline shield-doors of the House of the Scorpionidas. The great gates danced with the blood-red veins of webbing that marked the arachnid clan. The awesome reputation of the Scorpionidas for close-quarter combat had been hard won through blood and toil, so the Saeemrar deployed stealth and surprise as their first weapons.

The exarch raised his clenched fist above his head, indicating that his squad should hold its formation. The Bloodguard held fast,

neither breathing nor thinking, permitting no trace of their presence to escape. They were motionless against the deepening greens of the house walls, the dirty reds of their armour hazing incredibly into camouflage. A vague sting flooded out through the gates, and the Saeemrar feared that they had been discovered already. But it was no psykotoxin, merely the seer-wave of Bureea searching for danger. It passed in an instant, sweeping along the access corridor with wisps of psykic tendrils questing for prey.

Quereshir opened his fist again, and Lureal started to set the melta-bombs, fusing each into the fabric of the gates using the intense fire of his flamer at close range.

*Set.*

*On three, captain.*

*Understood.*

*'One.'*

The seer-wave at the end of the corridor visibly spun on its axis and came storming back towards the gates, seeking the voice.

*'Two.'*

The cloud started to darken as it drew closer, charging itself with venom, sprinkling tiny shards of psykoconductive crystal as it flew. Behind the gates, in the great hall of the Scorpionidas, the Saeemrar could hear barricades being thrown precisely into place amidst the muffled barking of orders.

*'Three!'*

The melta-charges exploded sending a superheated backblast of fire jetting along the corridor away from the gates. The mighty gates buckled under the prodigious blast, arching back into the temple before being ripped apart. Molten emerald sprayed out into the interior, sending the defenders diving for cover behind their hastily erected barricades.

Outside, the venom of the seer-wave was beginning to bite, its crystals wedging themselves into the armour of Saeemrar warriors before being triggered by a tremendous psykic blast from somewhere in the inner sanctum of the temple. Tiny strafes of pain erupted in their flesh as a dozen clansmen dropped to the ground, their limbs spontaneously ripped from their bodies as they struggled to rid their minds of the invading toxins.

Quereshir was inside the breach an instant after the melta had blown. For a moment the scene was motionless and he paused in

disappointment, scanning the hall for the promise of battle. The magnificent visage of the golden exarch standing unflinchingly amidst the rain of debris, cast into glittering relief by the fire from the flamers of his Bloodguard as they sought to cleanse the hall from the outside, was chillingly beautiful. Then, from behind him, came the searing whine of a shuriken, shattering the aesthetic of the moment, and the *mêlée* began. The exarch ducked into a roll, flipping forward as the shuriken zipped over his head. He stayed in his crouch searching for the gunner, as the ricochet bounced twice between pillars before its energy was spent. Quereshir released three fusion bolts from his gun, and the sniper behind the entrance was lifted off his feet into a staccato flight before crumpling to the ground in ashes.

Lureal hoisted the red and gold banner of the Saeemrar, its serpentine dragon fluttering at the tip of his firepike as he led the charge into the great hall to support the exarch. 'SAEEMRAR!'

Quereshir realised too late that the hall was a deathtrap. As the Saeemrar flooded the chamber with melta and flame, creating a ring of death around the perimeter of the circular hall with the exarch resplendent at the centre, a hail of shuriken ripped through the burning air and tore into the rapidly diminishing squadron. Those shuriken that missed their mark ricocheted back from the pillars that punctuated the hall or from the giant curving walls, focussing the venomous projectiles back into the killing zone in the centre. The Scorpionidas themselves were tucked in behind their barricades, impervious to all but the most direct strike from a fusion gun.

In an instant, the hall was a dizzying mist of shuriken, as the Scorpionidas released thousands of the monomolecular projectiles each second. The Saeemrar were being ripped to pieces by the lacerations of the air itself, their flames obscuring their assailants rather than damaging them. With each passing moment a dozen or more warriors collapsed to the deck, their limbs, heads and abdomens serrated beyond hope, riddled with death.

*This is not the end!* Quereshir could feel the will of the ancient exarch reaching through the psyko-plastic of his armour, mocking his indecision, but he did not know what to do. Meanwhile, Lureal

stood with his back to Quereshir, projecting the intense melta-beam of his firepike directly into the barricade that blocked their advance into the inner sanctum. He stood his ground, daring the shuriken to sting him, knowing that his destiny would not end in this hall.

*Kill them. Kill them all!* The voice inside Quereshir's mind continued to taunt him, driving him insane with anger. *Get out of my head!*

*This is your head. There is no escape from your path now. There is only escape from this hall. Kill them all. You are the Lost One.*

Quereshir watched his mighty Bloodguard fall, following him with unquestioned loyalty to their deaths, fighting their brothers at his word. Khaine forgive me! The exarch launched himself into the air, fusion gun firing continuously as he leapt above the killing zone, like a fountain of fire erupting from the epicentre of battle. At the apex of his leap, he spun rapidly, extending his arms as stabilisers, like a gyroscope, hovering for a moment on sheer energy. His eyes dilated slightly, triggering the release of the melta-bombs that were fixed into constellations along the armour of his arms. They flew outwards, curving under the centrifugal forces of his spin, scattering themselves around the perimeter of the great hall.

The exarch landed lightly into a crouch in the centre of the chamber as his Kinsmen continued to blaze all around him. He rose to his feet and his melta-bombs exploded, incinerating huge chunks of wall and pillar, running cracks snaking into the ceiling, which collapsed, crushing those few Scorpionidas who had survived the blasts. The last ricochets of shuriken vanished, and the hall was cast into silence.

'Area secure,' reported Lureeal with laconic whit.

*We will crush them like the insects they are!* whispered the Menshad Korum, sending terrible chills into the souls of the remaining Saeemrar clansmen.



**T**HEY ARE AT the gates.  
I know.

You must leave. The exarch is with them.

*Gather the Riders, we must get to the core before Quereshir finds us.*

The explosion that breached the gates sent shivers through Bureea as she detonated the psykoconductive crystals embedded in the Saeemrar warriors and simultaneously called for the Scorpionida Rider Host to assemble in the sanctum. The Arbariar lay in her jetbike, waiting for her wing to fall in. Twelve riders came running in through the blast-shields of the sanctum an instant before they were automatically sealed, following the breach of the great hall. Their jetbikes were already in formation, poised ready for an instant strike at any time, and the riders slid into them as though into a second skin. Indeed, the deep green deflector armour, laced with trickles of blood-red webbing echoed the armour of the Scorpionida Warriors. The bikes sported red-black scorpion's tails at the rear, which encased a shuriken cannon, and two matching pedipalp pincers protruded from the front, which housed the venomous powerblades of jetbike scythes.

The engines fired up, temporarily obliterating the cacophonous chaos of battle in the outer chamber of the temple. *We must get this soul to the core.* The Riders responded in unison, *Understood.* Arbariar turned her face to Bureea, though her elegant features were hidden behind the startling red of her helmet, Hide. Then, with a twitch of her right wrist, the engine roared into life and the jetbike parallaxed into a stream of greens and reds, searing through the escape tunnel that ran from the back of the sanctum and bursting out into the jungles of the life-dome of Saim-Hann, her Wild Riders in close pursuit.

Bureea felt the fatal silence fall in the great hall, and she climbed up the steps in front of the scorpion altar to face the enemy when they came through the blast-shields. The emerald doors to the sanctum began to glow with orange heat, radiating out from the centre where the melta-beam must have been concentrated on the other side. With a sudden roar and a deafening sonic blast, a golden figure burst through the molten ruins, tucked into a ball as though fired from a cannon. The Menshad Korum exarch rolled to his feet at the base of the stairs to the altar, and his Saeemrar Bloodguard climbed through the ruins of the blast-shields to fan out behind him.



'Where is she?' *Where is She?* The question echoed powerfully in Bureea's mind, but she could not identify its psychic source. She considered Quereshir closely. *Again you come too late, son of Vlalmerch.* Bureea held her ground in the face of the towering might of the exarch. She was a wych-seer of the Scorpionidas and would give nothing to this weak and deluded mind.

*Where Is She?* The question returned, more powerful, more emphatic, and Bureea pushed her head into her hands in a vain attempt to shut out the voice. *Where is she?* The question repeated itself over and over, beating against the inside of her skull, obliterating her own thoughts and yet compelling her to answer. In an instant, Quereshir knew Arbariar's plan, and he summoned his Wild Riders who lay in wait outside the temple. Bureea slumped to her knees in front of the altar, her eyes bulging in their sockets under the pressure in her head, aghast at the single-minded power of the exarch before her. Was that really his psychic-voice? Sharing her last moment of horror with her one-time ally, she asked, *Did you ever see your father's waystone? Do you know why he hid it beneath that armour you wear?*

By the time the Saeemrar Wild Riders arrived, Bureea was dead, and he who was once Quereshir slid easily into his jetcycle at the head of the squadron. The Saeemrar Riders shimmered in their bloodstained bikes, with golden fins projecting on each side, bristling with fusion barrels. On the nose of every machine, enlivened by icons of twisting flames, protruded a rapier-like firelance.

'They are heading for the core,' hissed the voice of Quereshir through the bike's com-channel. 'They seek to cast the soul of Vlalmerch into the infinity circuit and bring doom to Saim-Hann. Our ancient House shall not be implicated in this black treachery, this compact with the unspeakable ones.'

*For Vengeance and Glory!* 'For vengeance and glory!' cried the exarch as he kicked his jetcycle into gear and it rocketed forward into the escape tunnel. 'For the Saeemrar and Saim-Hann!' called Lureeal, as he powered after his lord.



**A**RBARIAR FLASHED through the jungle, the blurred greens of her bike blending incisively into the foliage. She wove urgently through the trees, scything down those that she could not avoid. Following in her jet-stream came the Scorpionida Riders, each willing themselves to greater and greater speeds, conscious of the plans that were unfolding amongst the leaves around them.

*Second wing, fall back and provide cover.*

*Understood.*

Six riders broke away from the pack, peeling off to the right in a delicate chain formation, curving back to retrace the vapour trails of the leading riders. They slowed to sub-sonic speeds as their seer-screens flickered into life, indicating twelve hostiles approaching hypersonically. The six Scorpionida Riders fanned out to form an offensive pincer, with the flanks twenty metres in advance of the centre.

*'Accelerate to attack speed.'*

*'Understood.'*

The Scorpionida Riders lay flat onto their bikes as they accelerated through the trees heading directly for the advancing Saeemrar, who showed no sign of slowing.

*'There, on the horizon.'*

*'Affirmative. Targets acquired.'*

As one, the Scorpionida squadron banked slightly to their left, widening their formation to outflank the larger numbers of Saeemrar Riders who roared through the space that separated them. Scorpionidas and Saeemrar opened fire simultaneously, shuriken cannons and fusion bolters filling the rapidly diminishing space with horrifying noise and superheated shards of death. Two of the Saeemrar machines abruptly fell behind the attacking line before accelerating off into flanking arcs to each side. Two more coughed and plumed smoke into the air, loosing their stabilisers in a hail of shuriken, spinning over and over before drilling into trees in javelins of fire.

Then the space was closed and the Wild Riders flashed passed each other, weaving through a frenzy of lances and scythes. Four Saeemrar Riders slowed into a turn to continue the joust whilst the rest powered on after Arbariar, joined belatedly by the two flankers who had fled the fight. Three golden helmets rolled on the jungle floor, sliced from their bodies by the pincer scythes of the Scorpionida Wing. Impaled on the lances of

two of the turning Saeemrar, the surviving Scorpionidas could see two of their comrades, hanging limply. Balls of flame in the undergrowth indicating the fate of their bikes.

Lureal released a blinding flash of fire from his lance, incinerating the eldar slumped over the nose of his machine, and gouging great chunks out of the attacking line of Scorpionidas. He kicked his bike into gear and charged back into the fray, fusion barrels glowing with discharge and his lance blazing a path before him. The two green bikes in the centre of the Scorpionida formation pulled up in flames before exploding in mid-air, sending burning shrapnel scattering into the foliage, igniting fires in the undergrowth wherever it landed.

The two remaining Scorpionida Riders had closed into proximal range, sliding their bikes sideways into the stampeding line of Saeemrar, twisting their pincer scythes and wrenching the firelances free from two of the blood-red machines, causing the bikes to destabilise and strafe with internal explosions. Lureal banked his machine sharply as he overshot the combat zone, and then accelerated back into the mangled mess of explosions and twisted chasses. He arrived with fusion flaring from his golden fins, catching the fuel cells of a Scorpionida bike which was struggling to free itself from the contorted remains of its prey. The bike bucked and exploded, obliterating a Saeemrar Rider who was blazing in from the rear. Lureal drew his powerblade as his guns overheated and launched himself from his bike onto the back of the remaining Scorpionida, sending his own jetcycle spiralling uncontrolled into a tree. Lureal lifted his blade and plunged it vertically down through the back of the Wild Rider who lay beneath him, fighting desperately to keep control of his machine. The blade passed straight through the treacherous eldar, rupturing a clutch of fuel lines in the bike below, and the machine was transfigured into a sudden fireball. Lureal, captain of the Saeemrar Bloodguard, grinned with the perfection of his end as the flames consumed him.



**L**ELITH'S TEETH shone brilliantly in the intense darkness of her seer-chamber. Her lips were a breath apart, as she carelessly toyed around the point of an extended incisor with her tongue. The images cycling through her mind pleased her, and she was enjoying the delicate pleasure of picking between the various victories that were unfolding into her future. The seeds planted a century before were blossoming perfectly into barbed and poisonous fruits – she could taste their bitter delights in her own acidic saliva. The craftwar of Saim-Hann was underway.

A gentle breeze breathed into the chamber, swirling the cool air into a vapour that curdled around the wych queen like a cloak of mist. Lelith shrugged her sculpted shoulders, as though shaking free of an unwanted hand, sending her hair into cascades of shimmering blackness. The mist swirled into an eddy in the centre of the chamber, dragging its rejected tendrils across Lelith's skin, leaving tiny, reluctant, silver trails drawn over her back.

The runes that swam over the iridescent walls of the chamber began to glow with a red so deep that it was almost imperceptible in real space. Waves of sha'iel pulsed through the calligraphy, rippling the colours and shapes between multiple realms of existence.

Lelith shivered slightly, disliking the moisture that was seeping into the atmosphere of her chamber from an infinitely fertile world. She narrowed her eyes, waiting for the messenger to take its chosen form, squinting her disdain into the shapeless mist that intruded in her space. The languorous fog offended her with its lack of urgency. The liberties it took with her skin would have damned any other being to exquisite heights of pain and suffering. But there was no threat that she could extend to this visitor, and that angered her even more.

Eventually, a shape began to form in the spiralling mist. It was hardly visible in the darkness of the seer-chamber, just the suggestion of vapour in the air. Lelith recognised the vague face at once. She had been expecting him. The under-determined figure in the mist suggested a staggering beauty, and even Lelith felt a smile fight for a brief moment on her face. In the air around the manifestation, a gorgeous scent started to disseminate into the chamber. Lelith noted it without any outward signs of recognition,

allowing the rich stench of blood to flood in between her lips, leaving the tantalizing taste of death on her tongue. The cool of her seer-chamber was ruined by fecund moisture and, despite herself, Lelith loved it.

*I have come to thank you, Lelith, for the morsel you sent to me.*

Lelith watched in fascination as the figure's mouth formed the soundless words that eased into her mind with velvety smoothness. This thing was disgustingly impressive.

*We have a bargain, she replied. There is no place for gratitude here.*

*Yes, we have a bargain, and morsels were not part of it, Lelith. I grow weary of waiting.*

Lelith twitched at duplicity of the languid wretch, wrenching herself out of the nauseating reverie that had threatened to overcome her. *Be gone, messenger! I am aware of our terms. My ways are more subtle than yours. My plan is underway and there will be thousands of souls ripe for our harvest soon.*



**T**HE BURNING wreckage of two more Scorpionida Riders blurred passed Quereshir, falling behind in plumes of smoke and flame. They tumbled into the oncoming rush of his wingmen, destroying the last of his squadron in an immense collision. The exarch's fusion guns fired continuously, sending molten volleys into the trails of the fleeing traitors. Bursting out of the jungle and into the wraithbone edifice of the craftworld itself, he wove through the narrow infrastructural corridors of Saim-Hann with consummate skill, as though anticipating the ventilation tubes or sudden corners before they appeared – as though guided by some external force. Not even Arbariar could match his skill. Despite the years she had spent mastering the Aspect Arts of the Striking Scorpions, she was no match for an exarch. He was gaining on her, drawing more speed from his hate and his desperate need not to be too late again. At last his bolts tore into the engine of the final Scorpionida Rider, sending it spiralling into the immovable wraithbone wall.

*Now it is only us!*

The two riders flashed through the labyrinth of tunnels that perforated the craftworld of Saim-Hann, heading deeper and deeper into its skeletal structure. Despite himself, Quereshir was impressed by the skill of his prey; he grinned in anticipation of the battle to come, clicking his fusion guns from automatic to manual.

*This is not what you think.* Quereshir squinted his eyes to shut out the thoughts of Arbariar, squeezing off a thread of light from his firelance to silence the voice in flame. The Scorpionida chieftain bobbed smoothly over the lancefire as it scored the underside of her bike, sending pulses of heat through the machine's chassis. *Your father will be safe in our spirit pool, it is his only hope. He would bring doom to you, exarch.*

*There is No Hope, only Fate.* A distant thought echoed into both of their minds.

Arbariar flicked on her guidance-seer and inhaled sharply when she saw how close she was; perhaps ten seconds separated her from the core. She moved her feet into the firing stirrups of the shuriken cannon and turned it through 180 degrees, facing back toward the hunter at her heels. Clicking the mechanism to automatic, she could hear the plasti-crystal generator whine into life, and the magnetic repulsor began to rattle off thousands of arbitrary shards into her wake.

The exarch watched the Scorpion's sting revolve to face him, jetting out showers of tiny shurikens, filling Arbariar's slipstream with a dark venomous cloud. He angled his jetcycle up to the ceiling of the passage, skimming over the lining of the fog and scrapping all of the paint off the belly of his machine. From his new vantage he rapidly squeezed off two fusion bolts, which flashed down into the coolant chambers on the Scorpionida's bike, pushing it towards the ground and disabling its thrusters.

Arbariar wrestled with the controls, but her bike was shaking violently. It ploughed into the wraithbone deck with a shrill scrape, sending sparks flying through the passage way. The machine skidded and tumbled along the corridor, but Arbariar leapt clear before it crashed into the apex of a vicious twist in the tunnel, rolling to her feet into readiness.

Quereshir dipped the nose of his bike and spun the rear through 180 degrees, sliding into a stationary hover as he overshot the wreckage on the deck beneath him. With only a fraction of hesitation, he clicked the



fusion guns back onto automatic and fired up the firelance, everything searing through the air toward his downed foe. Then he kicked the bike into motion and charged down at her.

Arbariar danced beautifully between the droplets in this rain of death, spinning and flipping her way through an invisible, safe path in the torrent. As Queres Shir drew near, she powered up her Scorpion's Claw, releasing a tirade of shuriken from the cannon that ran from the gauntlet along her arm, and then forced the cleaving powerfist up into the weakened underbelly of Queres Shir's machine. The jetcycle spluttered and then erupted, oozing flames through the passage and sending the exarch clattering to the ground.

Queres Shir landed heavily, but was quickly on his feet, bathing in the flames that licked at his golden armour. Immediately he was charging at the Scorpionida chieftain, fusion pistol flaring and power sword circling with a lethal flourish. Arbariar dropped to one knee, perfectly placing a single shuriken into the left arm of the frenzied exarch. Queres Shir winced with the impact, and seethed in anger as the psykotoxins forced him to release his grip on the fusion gun. But then he was on her, his blade piercing her chest as she staggered to her feet. The mandiblasters in her helmet spat impotently as the exarch lifted her off her feet, draped over the blade of his sword.

'Give me my father's soul!'

*That Soul is Mine.* Arbariar had been nauseated by those voiceless words before, and they made her hesitate. *Queres Shir, wait...*

With both hands, she clasped the blade that punctured her body, trying to relieve some of the weight that was slowly cutting her in two. 'You must not blend his soul into the spirit pool of the Menshad Korum,' she whispered, blood beginning to trickle from the corner of her mouth. 'It is too close to the abyss already. He will bring ruin to your Kin and darkness to our people. It is the worst of all possible futures. He will reap war on Saim-Hann. In craftwar only the unspeakable ones can win.'

Queres Shir could not believe his ears, 'You dare to insult the honour of the Saemrar! You who would commit us all to ages of war and destruction by casting the waystone into the core?'

'Perhaps, but that future is uncertain, and is a less bloody path in the end. We can protect him. Let the core cleanse his soul and

intertwine him with the good. It is his only hope. Do it for him. For us there is only calculated risk.'

*There is no Hope, only the Inevitable.* The distant voice echoed into their minds again.

Queres Shir could contain his fury no longer, and he ripped his blade from the body of Arbariar, splitting her in two and flicking her own pulsing emerald waystone from her breast. He stooped down to her body, watching the last remnants of her life blink silently out of her eyes. There, tightly gripped in the lifeless Scorpion Claw, was his father's soul, shimmering and utterly black.

The son of Valmerch stared wordlessly into the palm of his vanquished foe, and something deep within him stirred in revulsion, but it came too late. From somewhere outside, a voice oozed into his mind, *That Soul is Mine, it was Pledged to Me Long Ago.* Queres Shir could feel the voice seducing him, fragments of it already riddled the psyko-plastics of his armour, compelling his body. *The Path of the Exarch is Lonely and Savage, Precarious. You are the Menshad Korum.*

The son of Valmerch reached down for his father's waystone. Resigned, desperate, and horrified, he pushed it into the breast-plate of his ancient armour, already studded with the souls of all of those who had worn it before. He could feel the icy chill spread out over the spirit pool, and he could sense the other souls reeling in anguish as the darkness descended upon them. Horror flooded into his blood as the spirit swam through his body, already irrevocably synthesised with the ancient armour. His own soul twisted in revulsion and withdrew into itself, petrified with shame and terror. It could do nothing as Queres Shir's mind fell into the abyss and his intent became filled with darkness.

Far away, in the lashes of the Eye of Terror, he who was once Queres Shir felt the motion of a giant starship entering the webways.

*Sow the seeds, reap the harvest. Darkness comes for you.*

Picking Arbariar's emerald waystone from the floor, the Lost Warrior turned to harvest more fruits before the arrival of his queen. ♣

CS Goto is the author of *Dawn of War*, the awesome tie-in to the smash hit computer game from THQ, available at all good book stores.

## A BLACKHEARTS STORY

## HETZAU'S FOLLIES

by Nathan Long

**R**EINER HETZAU watched through the barred window of the camp brig as the hangman tested the trap of the gallows on the parade ground. With the pull of a lever, the trap fell open and a sack of dirt hung from the noose dropped and jerked in a way that made Reiner swallow – then laugh.

He swallowed because he was due for that drop tomorrow morning at dawn before the assembled troops of Count Jurgen's army. He laughed because, after all the foolish things he'd done in his misspent young life, he was to be hung for crimes he had not committed.

Certainly he wasn't entirely blameless in the affair. But when he had recognized his errors and seen the coming horror he had done his best to rectify the situation. In fact, it wouldn't be going too far to say that he had saved the camp, and by extension the whole army, from a plague of Chaos that might have brought down the Empire.

But had they rewarded him? Showered him with titles and lands? No. They had thrown him in the brig with the dregs of the Empire's armies: murderers, deserters, thieves, rapists, profiteers and smugglers, and fitted him for a noose.

He laughed again. To think that three days ago he had been complaining to Hennig – poor Hennig – of boredom. By Ranald, he would give all the gold in the world to be that bored again.

**R**EINER AND HENNIG stood with their feet in the door of Madam Tolshnaya's house of joy, trying to keep her from closing it in their faces. Their breath hung in the air and fat snowflakes pinwheeled down from the gray sky and clung to their cloaks.

'I assure you, my dear procuress,' said Reiner, 'the paywagon is due tomorrow. We will be able to pay you twice what we owe.'

'You say that last week,' said Madam Tolshnaya, a proud Kislevite beauty of middle years with a nose like a hawk and the curves of an Araby harem dancer.

'But this week it's true,' said Hennig.

'Have a heart,' begged Reiner. 'We are stranded far from home, deprived of all gentle company.' He put an arm around Hennig's shoulder. 'Look at this lonely lad.' Karl was a beardless boy of seventeen, three years Reiner's junior. 'Won't you do your part to raise the spirits of a noble warrior who defends your land from the depredations of Chaos?'

Madam Tolshnaya curled her lip. 'You want spirits raised, raise you some money.' She slammed the door.

Hennig jerked his foot back in time, but Reiner wasn't so quick. The door caught his toe and he hopped around on his bad leg, hissing and cursing in the muddy street. He flung himself onto a wooden bench outside the tavern next door to Madam Tolshnaya's, groaning. 'Any more of that Samogon, Hennig?' he asked.

Hennig joined him and handed him his flask. 'Just a swallow.'



Reiner gulped down the potent Kislevite liquor, wincing as it burned its way to his empty stomach. 'Good lad. I'll fill this again tomorrow, when...'

'When the paywagon comes,' finished Hennig dryly.

They sat for a while in the lazily falling snow, watching the endless river of shabby refugees who were crowding into the town fleeing the devastation in the north, from Praag, Erengard and little hamlets too numerous to name, all razed to the ground by the unstoppable hordes of Chaos.

That was why Reiner and Hennig were here on the Empire's border with Kislev. Noble sons, like most pistoliers, they had come up with Von Stolmen's Pistols from Whitgart only two weeks ago, attached to Count Jurgen's army. Upon arrival, they had been sent instantly to the front without a chance to recover from the long march, and thrown into a fierce action against mounted marauders at Kirstaad. What a mess that had been. No briefing. No orders. Just in at a gallop and every man for himself. The pistols, light cavalry meant to wheel, fire and retire, had been forced to stand and fight like armored knights when a troop of halberdiers broke before a Chaos charge and blundered willy-nilly into their line of retreat.

Reiner and Hennig had both been wounded in the hard-fought withdrawal; Reiner with a gash in his thigh and hadn't that bled like a river Karl with a handful of broken fingers. After the battle they had been declared unfit to fight, and sent back to Vuls with the other wounded, where the army was quartered, to recover from their wounds.

Now, two weeks later, with his wound only a throbbing annoyance, Reiner was going stir crazy. Vuls, like border towns the world over, had its share of diversions: brothels, taverns and bearpits, even a crude little inn-yard theatre where broad slapsticks were performed, but nearly all had been commandeered by the army for officers' quarters, stock rooms and stables. Every space with four walls and a roof was packed with counts and their retinues, knightly orders with their grooms, cooks and servants, companies of greatswords, crossbowmen and pistoliers and engineers with barrels of volatile substances, as well as assorted priests of Sigmar and Morr, and their acolytes. And what space the army disdained was crawling with refugees: starving peasants huddled in the leas of buildings, desperate merchants

standing guard over mud-spattered wagons, threadbare Kislevite cavalry tented with their horses on frozen stubblefields. There wasn't room in town to swing a cat, not that there were cats to swing, for food was scarce, and many was the peasant Reiner had seen eating cat, rat or his own shoe leather and calling it dinner.

But even if the army and the refugees hadn't been in residence, and all the town's entertainments open for business, Reiner and Hennig still wouldn't have been able to partake, for they were flat broke. Reiner had not lied to Madam Tolshnaya. The paywagon was due the next day, just as it had been due a week previous, when a party of Raiders had ambushed it and made off with everything. The army hadn't been paid in a fortnight, and the meager allowance Reiner's miserly father had reluctantly doled out to him before he left home was long gone.

'By Sigmar, Hennig,' said Reiner. 'I am damned tired of this poverty.'

'As am I,' agreed Hennig. 'I wonder how the poor stand it.'

'I'm a man of the world,' said Reiner, gesturing grandly. 'I need sophisticated diversion! Music, poetry, stimulating company, food worthy of the name.'

'Eh?' said Hennig, affronted. 'You don't find me stimulating company?'

'Not below the waist, lad. Terribly sorry.'

Hennig guffawed. 'You cut me to the quick.'

Reiner rested his chin on his palm. 'How to make some money? There's no looting to be done.' He waved at the shambling river of refugees. 'These poor wretches have nothing, and the campaign will be over before we're allowed back to the front. No chance at battlefield trophies or Chaos curios to sell to "men of learning." Even selling my armour wouldn't buy enough for a night's drinking. Sigmar curse my father's skinflint heart. He wouldn't pay for new kit. Hand-me-downs he gives me. A bunch of dented tin an orc wouldn't go to battle in.'

'What about dice?' asked Hennig. 'Didn't you tell me you once made your living at the tables?'

'One needs a stake to enter a game,' said Reiner defensively. He didn't care to mention that he'd lost his taste for gaming during the hurried retreat from Kirstaad, when he'd also lost his 'special' dice.



There was a commotion across the street. Reiner and Hennig looked up. An Empire foot patrol had stopped three carts crowded with prostrate forms – sick soldiers by their moans and shivers. The drivers didn't look much better than their passengers, slack jawed, rheumy eyed fellows. The only member of the party who seemed at all alert was a woman on the lead cart. She was a slim waif in the robes of a Sister of Shallya, goddess of mercy and healing.

The captain of the patrol was Deiter Ulstaadt, a pompous fool whom Reiner knew well. He was an 'unbriable' who had broken up some of Reiner's recent money-making schemes: the card parlor in the powder magazine, the conscript prize fights, the sale in charms for protection against Chaos. Reiner leaned forward to listen.

'It is out of the question,' Deiter was saying. 'You'll have to take them elsewhere.'

'But, my lord,' said the priestess, 'they can go no further. They are very ill.'

'Precisely the point, sister,' said Deiter. 'With the town so full and our hospitals overflowing, disease spreads like wildfire. We need no more fuel for the blaze.'

The sister looked about to weep. Reiner's heart went out to her. The poor thing seemed crushed by her responsibilities.

'Sir knight,' she said, 'Will you truly turn away noble heroes of the Empire, struck down in the fight of Chaos?'

'I have my orders, miss.'

'Could you not relax them for pity's sake? Our convent was not wealthy, but in the wake of its burning, I have been entrusted with its treasury. I know the lot of a soldier far from home is a hard one...' She moved the skirts of her habit aside to reveal a silver chased casket under her seat.

Deiter held up a hand, his face reddening. 'In light of your desperation, sister, I will forget this if you turn about now and leave here peaceably.'

The priestess of Shallya hung her head, and Reiner thought he saw a very unshallyan snarl twitch her lips as she motioned her drivers to turn the carts around. Deiter marched away with his squad, no doubt to find some poor innocent to harass.

Reiner sat up, mashed toes forgotten. 'Hennig, my lad,' he said. 'If that wasn't the hand of Ranaid dropping golden opportunity in our laps, I'm a skaven.'

'You mean to steal that box of swag?'

'Don't be crude. Of course not. She's going to give it to us.'

Reiner and Hennig stepped into the crowded street where the priestess's caravan of casualties was still manoeuvring.

'Reverend Sister,' called Reiner. 'I couldn't help overhearing your poor treatment at the hands of that oaf, and I think I may have a solution that could benefit us both.'

The priestess, who was quite attractive, in a pale, drawn sort of way, looked nervously over her shoulder. 'I have no wish to break the law, my lord.'

'Oh, pish,' said Reiner smoothly. 'Is it a just law that turns out the sick? If you can pay a little for rent, and... ah, the efforts of your humble servant, the law won't enter into it.'

The woman sighed, relieved. 'The blessings of Shallya upon you, my lord.'

A warm glow filled Reiner's heart. 'My thanks, sister. Wait but a moment, and I will arrange all.'



'ABSOLUTE NO!' said Madam Tolshnaya, crossing her arms over her ample chest. 'This clean house. I want no sickness here. Bad for business.'

'But madam,' said Reiner, 'there is no need to put them in the house. Are not your stables vacant? Kuryev and his Eagles certainly don't need them anymore.'

'You speak so of the dead?'

'I meant no disrespect. The tale of their valiant sacrifice will be sung in the halls of the Boyars for generations, but they have left a vacancy, have they not?'

'Not for sick peoples.'

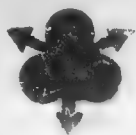
'Madam,' Reiner lowered his voice conspiratorially. 'The sister carries the treasury of her convent with her. You could charge her double, perhaps triple.'

Madam Tolshnaya's eyes narrowed. 'Triple?'

'And I would ask only a fifth, for bringing the business your way.'

'Only a fifth,' said Madam Tolshnaya dryly. But Reiner could see her calculating. At last she nodded. 'Hokay. Is good. Bring around back, so nobody see. And they no come in house, ever!'

'Of course not, Madam' said Reiner, bowing. 'You won't regret this.' He strode back to the street, grinning. Money at last!



**I**T WASN'T EASY money. The invalids were more diseased than Reiner could have imagined. In fact, he had a hard time believing men so ill could still be alive. Most were carried into the stables on planks, and even those who could walk shambled like sleepwalkers and were covered in purple pustules. One little fellow, a Kislevite with long moustaches and an enormous hat of snow leopard fur decorated with a gold and red cockade, had an open wound in his arm that crawled with maggots. They were laid down one to a stall on either side of the stable's central aisle.

Reiner stood well upwind of them as he accepted from the priestess, who introduced herself as Sister Anyaka, a small purse of reikmarks and jewels. He palmed it quickly. It wouldn't do to let Madam Tolshnaya see the transaction. Not when she had already paid him.



**T**HAT NIGHT, at one of Vusk's better taverns – which meant only that the floor was stone and not dirt, and that they burned wood and not yak dung in the fireplace – Reiner and Hennig toasted their good fortune with mugs of Samogon bought with the nun's gold.

'It gives one a warm feeling, Hennig, doing good,' said Reiner.

'Absolutely,' said Hennig, well on his way to inebriation. 'Burns all the way down.'

Reiner wiped his mouth. 'There's nothing more gratifying than charity. Particularly when it pays so well.'

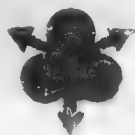
'Poor li'l sister,' said Hennig. 'Tendin' all those sickies. How does she stand the shmell?'

'That's what religion is for, lad.'

'It takes away the shmell?'

'No. Just makes you feel noble for bearing it. To your health.'

'And to yers.'



**T**HE NEXT MORNING, with heads that felt full of burning rocks, Reiner and Hennig returned to Madam Tolshnaya's to see if there was anymore milking to be done. By Reiner's estimation, the jewelled casket Sister Anyaka was carrying was still two-thirds full. But as the two friends walked around the brothel to the stables, Madam Tolshnaya stormed out to intercept them.

'She not keep them in stables!' she cried.

Reiner clutched his aching head. 'Say again, madam? Quietly, if you please.'

'The sick men. They walk around in middle of night. Scare my girls.'

'Ridiculous,' said Reiner. 'Those lads can barely crawl.'

'Svetya say she see sick man limp out back gate.'

'Most likely a drunk soldier,' said Hennig. 'Off to make yellow snow.'

'You're jumping at shadows,' added Reiner.

'Well,' said the madam sulkily, 'You tell shadows I want more money.'

They left her and knocked on the stable door. After a moment the sister opened it.

Reiner bowed. 'Good morning, sister. I trust the accommodations are adequate?'

'Most satisfactory, my lord.'

'I am gratified to hear it. We came to ask if there was anything else you required.'

The priestess frowned. 'Er, there are two things, but I hesitate to ask. One is less than pleasant.'

'We are yours to command,' said Reiner.

The woman bit her lip. 'Well, the first thing is easy enough.' She pulled a piece of parchment from her robe. 'Only take this to a wise woman and purchase these medicines. It is the second that may tax you. One of my patients is beyond my abilities to cure. He has a problem of the liver and needs the care of a surgeon. If you could get him to the infirmary of your camp, all would be well. The trouble is that he is a Kislevite.'

Reiner sucked air through his teeth. 'Mmm, yes. That is difficult. The doctors are a bit strict about who they let in. I'd have to ask a few people to look the other way, which might require further applications of cash.'

'Oh, certainly,' said the priestess. She opened the purse at her belt and pulled out a handful of coins, rings and broaches. 'Will this be enough?'

Reiner elbowed Hennig in the ribs, for the lad was gaping. 'Oh yes, this should do,' he said nonchalantly.



**H**ALF AN HOUR later, Reiner and Hennig were laughing and slapping one another on the back as they rode from the Empire camp on the cart with which they had delivered the sick man to the infirmary.

'A bit difficult, he says,' giggled Hennig. 'It was all I could do to keep a straight face.'

'Well you did, lad. There's more to be had from that fountain. We wouldn't want to spoil things. The girl's the easiest mark I've ever laid eyes upon.'

It had cost Reiner and Hennig exactly four silver pfennigs to purchase a uniform of the Talabheim Pike from a black marketeer, and while dressing the sick man in it and shaving his Kislevite moustaches had been less than pleasant experiences — he smelled awful and complained constantly that he was infested with daemons — the effort was worth it, for the rest had been easy. They had delivered him to the infirmary, left him and a description of his symptoms with an orderly, and rode away again with no questions asked and the golden contents of Reiner's purse untouched.

'Now,' said Reiner cheerily, 'let's go get the shopping done, and retire to Madam Tolshnaya's for a much deserved reward.'

But the second task proved more difficult. Even finding a wise woman was a chore. The villagers they asked wouldn't even admit that the town had a wise woman, insisting that they were modern people just like their Empire neighbors.

Reiner was confused by this attitude, attributing it first to anxiety over being thought inferior, but the words weren't said

defensively, but with a sullen furtiveness. At last Reiner realised that the townsfolk were afraid he was a Sigmarite witch finder, looking to hang their local dispenser of love charms for witchcraft.

The response changed instantly when he asked instead, in the hesitant and embarrassed voice of a schoolboy, if there was someone who sold talismans for protection against lover's pox. Then he was told, with smirks and elbow nudges, to go see old Mother Yagna. She would put everything right.

Reiner and Hennig found the wise woman in a thatch-roofed shack outside a small fishing village just a few leagues down the river road. She was a short, frog-faced old crone in colorful rags who scuttled between towering jar-lined shelves, a clay stove and her mortar and pestle with the activity of a spider. She was less suspicious than the villagers. It was obvious she was used to soldiers seeking her out for protections against hangovers, pox and unfriendly arrows, but her demeanor changed abruptly when she glanced at Anyaka's list.

She looked up at them sharply. 'You be murder somebody?'

'I beg your pardon?' said Reiner.

She waved a gnarled hand at the paper. 'These very dangerous. Make you sick. This one poison. This one...' She hesitated. 'Bad magic.'

'Ridiculous,' said Reiner. 'These were ordered by a Sister of Shallya, sworn to preserve life, not take it.'

The wise woman grunted. 'Huh. She got rats, this sister?'

'Undoubtedly. She's staying in a stables. Would this kill rats?'

The crone chuckled. 'Oh sure. Plenty rats.' But she made no move toward her jars and bottles, only continued looking at Anyaka's list.

I don't mean to rush you, mother,' said Reiner impatiently. 'But we have many things to do today.'

Mother Yagna pursed her lips and held out the list. 'Am sorry. I have not these things. I cannot help you.'

'Foolish old crone,' said Reiner, losing patience. 'Do you dare defy me?'

Reiner loomed over the woman menacingly. She smelled of turnips and bitter herbs. 'Listen, witch. You exist here at the mercy of the Empire, which has so far turned

a blind eye to your heathen hedge magics. But it could just as easily go hard on you if you were accused of consorting with daemons, if someone were to say you'd been kissing the enemy's fundament by the light of the full moon. Do you understand me?

Mother Yagna met his eye with an unblinking glare. She said nothing.

'Now, I am a fair man,' Reiner continued, 'I care not what two pfennig wart charms you fob off on ignorant peasants. I only want what I know you have, and I am willing to pay for it. Look!' He shook his purse. It jingled impressively. 'I will give you ten times what your leaves and twigs are worth. Only fill the order and let me be on my way.'

The old woman's expression hardened to stone. She turned without a word and began filling little foolscap envelopes with powders and herbs. By the time she had finished, a hard knot of remorse had formed in Reiner's chest. He had no compunctions about getting what he wanted through guile, but intimidation of the weak wasn't his way. It had no finesse. Consequently, when he dipped into his purse to pay her, he took out more than he intended, letting fall on her table a handful of coins and jewels.

'Here, mother,' he said. 'May this sooth your pride.'

The old woman sneered. 'I no want your...' She stopped, staring. With trembling hands she picked up a ring. 'Where you get this?' she demanded.

'Curse your insolence,' snarled Reiner. 'Why should I...'

'Graverobber!' The old woman advanced on Reiner, eyes wild. 'This ring of Boyar of village. Give him by Queen Katarin herself. He die fighting at Praag. You dig him up! You steal his ring!'

'Madam,' said Reiner, 'I assure you...'

'I know you now!' she interrupted. 'You no Imperial. You Chaos! Beast of Chaos!'

'Madam, please. Contain yourself.'

The old woman scooped up the coins and jewels and hurled them at Reiner and Hennig. The two pistoliers ran, ducking out of the door.



**H**ALFWAY BACK TO Vulsk, Hennig turned to Reiner, who sat lost in thought next to him on the buckboard of the cart.

'She didn't say it was for rats.'

'Hmmm?' Reiner lifted his chin off his palm.

'The sister. She didn't say the stuff was for rats. She said it was medicine.'

'I know that, lad,' said Reiner.

'But then why did you say...'

'I was only trying to ease things along.' He laughed harshly at that.

Hennig frowned. 'So then, do you think the witch was right?'

'Of course not! The witch is an ignorant peasant. She is doubtless unaware of the higher curative properties of her so-called poisons.' But Reiner was less than sanguine. If the business with the Boyar's ring had been an isolated incident, he might have laughed it off as the crazed imaginings of a demented crone, but the ring, on top of the revelation of the poisons, and Madam Tolshnaya's grumblings about the priestess's patients going bump in the night, it was all beginning to gnaw on him.



**R**EINER STOLE ALONE into the stables. Hennig was buying samogon for the both of them in the tavern next door.

'Sister Anyaka?' Reiner called. 'Sister, I would speak with you!' He glared around in the dim interior, looking for the priestess. He wished instantly that he hadn't entered. The smell was horrific, and the moans of the sick men fell unpleasantly on the ear. He could only barely make out their forms in the stalls, and was glad of it, but found that he was oddly distressed that he didn't see the little fellow with the snow leopard hat.

Sister Anyaka hurried out of the tack room at the back of the stable. 'Master Hetzau, is all well?'

'That you shall have to tell me, lady,' said Reiner stiffly. 'I have just... Er, could we talk outside. It's a bit, er...'

'Certainly,' said the priestess. 'I am used to the smell, but I understand completely.'



She led him into the yard. The afternoon sun had melted the morning's snow and there was a dry bench against the stable wall. They sat.

'Tell me, my lord,' said Anyaka, turning to Reiner. 'What is troubling you?'

Now that he came to it, Reiner was suddenly less certain about things. The young woman looked so innocent that he found his suspicions melting away. 'Er, well, er... I say, where's the little fellow with the big hat? The snow leopard hat.'

Anyaka looked confused a moment. 'Oh, you must mean Ulenko. He's getting some air.'

'Is he now? You surprise me. I wouldn't have thought he could even sit up.'

The priestess frowned. 'My lord, I can't believe you've called on me to ask after the health of one of my patients. What is wrong?'

Reiner's face fell. 'Forgive me. It's just a bit... Well, you see, I had a most awkward encounter with the wise woman you asked me to find. She recognized a ring you gave me and accused me of robbing her Boyar's grave to get it. Most disturbing. And I was wondering...

Anyaka put a soft hand on his arm. 'You poor man,' she said. 'To be harangued so on a mission of mercy. I only wish I had been there to explain to the woman.' She looked at him sadly. Her eyes were green, with the depth of the ocean. 'She was indeed correct. The ring's owner was a Boyar from near here. I curse myself for not thinking of the distress it might cause.'

She touched a hand to her chest. 'You see, our mission was just outside of Praag. We took in many of the dying during the battle, and many, being devout men, bequeathed to us their possessions as thanks for the comfort we gave them in their final hours. When... She paused, and a shiver passed through her. 'When the raiders overran the convent, I brought the treasury and those I could save south to continue Shallya's work here.' She looked up at him again, eyes moist. 'Have I explained things to your satisfaction, my lord?'

'Oh, yes. Absolutely,' said Reiner, blushing. He felt horrible, having asked such a question of so virtuous a woman. 'I crave your forgiveness.'

'You require none.' She put her hand on his. A warm thrill shot through him. 'Anyone might have thought the same.'

'Nonetheless...'

'And I wish,' she said, leaning forward so that the fabric of her habit tightened against the swell of her breasts, 'that since you are obviously a man who cares little for gold, there were some other way I might repay you for your trouble.'

Reiner's heart thudded audibly in his chest and perspiration sprung out on his brow. The priestess traced the veins of his hand with a delicate finger. 'The sisterhood of Shallya is dedicated to relieving suffering in all its forms,' she said softly. 'And I sense, master Hetzau, that you are suffering from loneliness, that you are ill from want.'

'Sister,' said Reiner hoarsely, and took her by the shoulders. She stopped him with a hand on his chest.

'Forgive me, my lord. It would be an honour — nay a pleasure — to tend to your needs, but the needs of my patients are greater, and there are things I must do before I can give you the attention you deserve.'

'How soon will you be done?' asked Reiner curtly. He couldn't remember when he had been so filled with desire.

The priestess smiled. 'Well, I'll be done the sooner, if you will once again assist me.'

'Anything,' said Reiner, licking his lips. 'Anything.'



**T**HE LENGTHS YOU will go to get your wick waxed will be the death of me,' growled Hennig as they again maneuvered the cart through the teaming town. 'Sigmar's oxter, what a stench.'

'Don't blaspheme, Hennig,' said Reiner. 'We do holy work.'

'But you're the only one who'll be getting a reward.'

'Now, lad. It isn't as if you've lost on the deal. I convinced the sister to give us more gold, as well as, er, intangibles.'

'I'm not sure if it's worth it.'

This time the cart's cargo was two corpses, reeking of death and disease, and covered in lesions and festering boils. Anyaka had tried her best, she said, but the two men — a handgunner from Nuln and a Kislevite lancer — had slipped through her fingers. She had asked Reiner to dispose of the

corpses: the handgunner to the army's priest of Morr, who operated the camp mortuary on the west side of town, and the Kislevite to the village's cemetery on the east, where the priests incorporated local customs into the ceremonies.

It was not a pleasant task. Even in the cold, the smell was overwhelming, and Hennig, stomach still delicate after the previous night's revels, had had to jump off the cart and vomit before they'd travelled half a league. But eventually they reached their first stop, the camp mortuary. Erected a discrete distance from the camp itself, it consisted of a few low black tents, one of which was a consecrated temple of Morr. A small, wood-framed shack sat behind it, which housed the furnace that cremated the dead. Tall stacks of firewood were piled next to this, and stacks of bodies, almost as high, were piled in front of the temple. The smell that drifted from them was the first thing to drown out the stench of the bodies Reiner and Hennig carried. Black robed acolytes of Morr crawled over the mounds like flies over carrion, preparing the corpses and taking them into the black canvas temple.

A burly acolyte with his sleeves folded back approached them as they trundled up.

'What have you there, my lords?' he asked.

'A citizen of Nuln,' said Reiner. 'Name unknown. And a Kislevite who we take to the local temple.'

'Very good, my lord,' said the man, turning to whistle at two acolytes who wore heavy gloves and kerchiefs over their faces. 'Though there'll be a wait until we can see to him properly.'

Reiner surveyed the mounds as the masked acolytes lifted the body off the cart. 'Does the war truly go so poorly?'

'T'aint the war, my lord. It's sickness. Last day or so they been dropping like flies. Don't know why.'

'Most disturbing.'

'Yes, sir.'



**I**T WAS DUSK. Shopkeepers were boarding up their storefronts and taverns were hanging out lanterns. As they rode through town to drop off the second body

Reiner and Hennig noticed a commotion in the town square. Villagers were using ropes to haul something out of the well, and just as Reiner pulled abreast, the men succeeded in getting it over the lip. It flopped to the street with a wet smack. It was a body, so bloated as to be unrecognizable. What was readily apparent however, was that the fellow had been terribly sick before he fell in. Though his waterlogged skin was the colour and consistency of gruel, Reiner could see black gangrenous wounds all over it.

'That accounts for the wave of illness,' he said.

'Good thing we only drink Samogon,' said Hennig.

Reiner was urging the carthorse forward again when a villager fished something else out of the well. At first Reiner thought it was a drowned cat, but then he saw it was a large Kislevite hat of snow leopard fur, pinned with a red and gold cockade.

'Damn and blast!'

'What's the matter?' asked Hennig.

Reiner geed the cart horse into a trot. 'That hat! Getting some air, was he? Randal curse the woman!' he cried.

'Who?' asked Hennig. 'The sister? Why are you angry at her?'

'Because if she's up to what I think she's up to, I won't be getting my "heavenly reward" this evening.'

Reiner drove the cart as fast as he could, which wasn't very fast. The streets were as crowded as ever with refugees, and Reiner spent as much time bawling at lollygaggers to get out of his way as he did moving forward. They were just three blocks from Madam Tolshnaya's and moving well at last when Reiner heard Hennig gasp.

'Reiner!' he said. 'Reiner, look! The corpse!'

Reiner glanced behind him and froze at the sight that met his eyes.

The Kislevite had been a trim, well muscled warrior in life. Now his abdomen was more bloated than that of the fellow who had drowned in the well. He looked like he'd swallowed a hogshead of Marienburg Ale whole. His belly was taut as a drum head; so tight that the skin was splitting. But that wasn't the worst of it. The balloon of flesh bulged and squirmed like a sack full of rats.

Reiner pulled on the reins and brought the cart to a juddering stop, then turned, staring.

'What is it?' asked Hennig. 'I've heard corpses fill with gas when they...'

His sentence went unfinished, for with a horrible wet pop, the body's stomach erupted in a shower of rotting flesh and putrid viscera. Reiner and Hennig recoiled, instinctively covering their faces as they were spattered with clots of stinking flesh. Choking and blinded, they didn't at first notice that, mixed in with the reeking ejecta, were small snot-coloured creatures that skittered over the cart on tiny, malformed legs.

The first Reiner knew of them was when one sank needle-like teeth through his boot into the flesh of his calf. He yelped and knocked it to the ground. His hand came away smeared with slime. Another bit his left toe. More climbed Hennig's legs. He plucked them off, gagging.

The street, a narrow way lined with tanneries and low taverns, was crowded with idle soldiers, street-hawkers and sisters of joy. The slimy vermin leapt off the cart into that river of humanity like fleas, biting and clawing, and the normal street chatter was replaced by bellows of pain and surprise. A moiling knot of victims twisted and swatted at the miniature horrors, looking for all the world as if they performed some strenuous dance. It would have been ludicrous were it not for the unfortunate soul, who fell, screaming, with eyes plucked out and veins chewed open to the muddy ground.

'What are they?' wailed Hennig, trying to knock one loose with his sabre.

'Nurglings!' said Reiner, snatching one off his shoulder and hurling it away. 'Revoltin' little beasts, aren't they? Ow!' He stomped on one that was biting his ankle.

Recovering from their initial shock, soldiers lounging outside nearby taverns rushed forward, swinging swords and stabbing with daggers. Reiner and Hennig jumped down and joined them.

'Second time today,' said a crossbowman. 'Things just like this' attacked the camp hospital not two hours ago. Killed a score of wounded before we put 'em down.'

Reiner frowned at this news, but a nurgling jumped on his leg and he had to attend to it.

The tide was turning when a young guardsman, riding past at a gallop, reined up sharply. 'What happens here?' he demanded, breathless.

'Nurglings,' said Hennig, still swatting. 'Corpse was full of them.'

'Sigmar preserve us,' said the guard, making the sign of the Hammer. 'It's an infestation. The same thing happened at the mortuary. I ride to inform Captain Ulstaadt. Now I shall have two tales to tell.'

'The mortuary?' said Reiner, but the boy had already spurred away. Reiner's stomach sank like he had swallowed lead shot. 'Hennig!' he called, climbing onto the cart. 'Mount up.' He pushed the exploded corpse off the cart with his boot, then grabbed the reins as Hennig swung up to the buck board beside him. Reiner slapped the reins across the horse's rump and they were off at a trot.



**I**T WAS FULL dark when they reached Madam Tolshnaya's, and the evening's festivities were already in full swing. Drunk troopers staggering in and out, arm in arm, singing bawdy songs. Knights intent on breaking their knightly vows ducked in discretely, the badges of their orders hidden under plain cloaks. Fiddles and flutes mixed with feminine laughter behind the glowing mullioned windows. But though those sights and sounds would normally have made Reiner green with envy, tonight he was too angry to pay them any mind. He disliked being beaten at his own game. He was nobody's dupe. Nobody's.

He slued the cart into the yard behind the brothel, scattering protesting soldiers as he went, and reined up with a skidding of hooves and a skittering of wheels. Drawing their sabres, he and Hennig leapt off the cart before it had come to a full stop and kicked in the stable door.

The long room was dark and silent, but smelled like a charnel house. Reiner and Hennig clapped hands over their faces, retching. At first they could see nothing, but soon their eyes adjusted. Anyaka's patients lay in their stalls as before, but seemed now very still - too still. Reiner and Hennig could hear no breathing or movement. All sound was lost in a constant low buzzing.

'What's that,' whispered Hennig through his fingers.

Reiner swallowed thickly. 'Flies, lad.'

The patients were dead, all of them. Reiner wondered with a prickle of dread if he had ever seen them alive, if they had all along been corpses, animated by some foul magic.

A faint orange glow emanated from the tack room. He put a finger to his lips and they tiptoed down the aisle, trying unsuccessfully to breathe without smelling. As they reached the tack room door the death stench mixed with another scent: a sweet, cloying mildew odor over a thick fecal reek that burned the eyes. They looked in the door.

Kneeling with her eyes closed behind a brazier of coals was Anyaka, but not the sweet Anyaka Reiner and Hennig knew. She had thrown open her priestess's habit, revealing her small but sinewy body, which glistened in the heat of the coals. At first Reiner thought that the swirling designs and eldritch symbols that covered her body – and which were echoed by others painted upon the tack room's wooden walls – were tattoos, but looking again, he realised, with a heaving of nausea, that they were deep cuts sliced into her skin, black with necrosis.

Over the brazier's coals sat a frying pan in which bubbled a viscous green stew. Prehensile tendrils of steam rose from it to caress Anyaka's nakedness obscenely.

As Reiner and Hennig watched, the priestess added to the stew from the packets Reiner had purchased for her, then ran her finger inside the cuts in her breast and abdomen and flicked into the pan the pus she gathered there. Fetid steam billowed up from the soup.

Hennig choked as the noxious cloud overwhelmed them. Anyaka's eyes flashed open. 'Defilers!' she cried. 'The ritual must not be interrupted!'

'Oh, but it must, lass,' said Reiner, advancing. 'Now back away from that fire.'

Anyaka did just that, but rather quicker than Reiner expected. She leapt up, snatched a dagger from her robe, and pulled a whip from a peg on the wall.

'Charge her!' cried Reiner. He and Hennig ran around the brazier. But as they did, Anyaka leapt over it and dashed out of the door. Reiner turned and ran after her, but Hennig paused.

'Wait, Hetz.' He kicked the frying pan. It slid off the brazier and splashed to the ground. Hennig jumped to avoid the spray and joined Reiner at the door.

'Good thinking, boyo,' said Reiner. 'Now quick, before she gets too far.'

But as they ran into the stables they saw Anyaka was standing near the door, hands raised. 'Servants of Nurgle, come forth and slay these unbelievers!' she called.

Reiner and Hennig slowed, looking around uneasily, half expecting daemons to materialise out of thin air. Reiner smirked when nothing happened. 'You seem to have an exaggerated opinion of your powers, lass.'

He and Hennig advanced on her again, but faint sounds to their left and right made them pause. It was a creaking, stretching noise, like leather being pulled taut. Their eyes settled on the body in the stall nearest them. Its stomach was swelling like a bladder filling with air. Reiner glanced at the stall opposite. That body too was swelling.

'Oh gods,' he groaned.

A wet pop sounded from the darkness, and another, followed by a horrible chittering and rustling. The body on their left exploded, showering them with rotten flesh as mucus-covered nurglings spewed from its stomach. The body on the right followed like an echo.

'Sigmar save us,' quavered Hennig. 'So many.'

'Forget 'em, lad,' said Reiner, starting forward. 'Get their mistress.'

He and Hennig ran at the sorceress, while corpses exploded left and right. But before they'd closed half the distance, Hennig cried out and fell.

Reiner stopped. Hennig was clutching his boot and screaming. Reiner looked down. Hennig's boot was falling apart. Where splashings of Anyaka's brew had touched it, the leather was eaten away, and the flesh beneath it boiled with blisters that split and popped as if Hennig's foot was on fire.

Hennig's shrieks grew louder. His hands, having touched his boots, were blistering as well. 'Stop it, Reiner! Make it stop!'

'Lad, I...'

Anyaka laughed. Reiner looked up. The sorceress was stepping into the yard and closing the door behind her.

'Foul witch!' he cried, but there was no time for curses. Out of the darkness a seething carpet of nurglings was converging on them.

'Hang on, lad.' Reiner grabbed Hennig under the arms and dragged him as fast as he could toward the closed door. It wasn't fast enough. A nurgling leapt on Reiner's back.



Three climbed up his legs. Another bit into his arm. They were crawling over Hennig like roaches. The boy swatted at them weakly, but they only bit his hands.

A nurgling clawed Reiner's neck. He dropped Hennig involuntarily and flung the little beast away. Hennig instantly disappeared under the wave of vermin. Reiner tried to pull him out, but nurglings swarmed around him, biting and scratching him to the bone. He roared with rage and pain and was forced to leap onto a parked draycart, stamping his feet and scraping with dagger and sabre to dislodge the beasts that clung to him. He was bleeding all over.

'Reiner!' shrieked Hennig, his voice unrecognizable in his terror. 'Reiner, save me!'

Hennig was but a thrashing mound under the madly squirming forms. An arm shot up out of the mass, clawing the air. It was stripped, only a few pink scraps hanging from wet bones. Then the arm sank again, falling apart as it dropped. The little demons had even eaten the cartilage.

Reiner's throat constricted. His friend was gone, who had moments before been a laughing, skirt-chasing lad with a contagious smile. 'Hennig... Karl. L... Gods, what am I to tell your mother?'

A nurgling bit his foot. Reiner yelped and danced back. No time for grief. The little demons were swarming up the cart's wheels. Reiner looked around desperately. He was too far from the door to run for it. The nurglings would bring him down before he got halfway there. He couldn't kill them all. He was no Sigmar, and nurglings were much smaller targets than orcs. If only he had wings.

The thought made him glance up, and his heart flooded with new hope. The hayloft had a small door, directly over the main door. Reiner leapt up, caught a crossbeam, and clambered up to the loft. A few nurglings came with him, clinging to his boots, and he rolled and kicked, twitching and biting back screams, until he had crushed the tenacious vermin into red paste.

The others didn't give up. Hearing a scabbling, he looked down. The nurglings were climbing the posts, digging their needle-sharp claws into the wood. Reiner hurried to the loft door and pushed it open. In the yard below, Anyaka listened at the stable door, belting her robe. Reiner smiled. Here was an opportunity not to be missed.

He leapt down, slashing with his sabre.

It was not quite the devastating attack he envisaged. First, he misjudged his leap, and jarred his sword arm against the wall as he dropped, so that while he knocked Anyaka flat, he missed her utterly with his sword. Second, he had forgotten his wounded leg. He grunted in pain as he landed on it and fell flat on his back.

Anyaka was up instantly, advancing with dagger and whip.

Reiner raised his sabre. 'Sorry, lass. Your ceremony will remain unfinished while I live.'

She smiled, her eyes focusing behind him. 'That won't be long.'

Reiner glanced back. The stable doors were swinging out, pushed open by a mass of nurglings spilling into the yard like a river breaking through a dam.

'Your doom is upon you,' laughed Anyaka.

Reiner cursed and scrambled painfully to his feet. 'At least you won't live to rejoice in it.' He lunged at her and cut her shoulder. She yelped and ran, trying to angle toward to the street, but Reiner blocked her way, slashing again. The nurglings swarmed toward them, their little eyes glinting in the lamp light like jewels.

Anyaka wheeled for the brothel's back door and disappeared into the kitchen. Reiner was behind her, limping madly.

The nurglings were right behind him.



**A** NYAKA AND REINER crashed through the narrow kitchen, frightening the Kislevite cook and the half-naked serving maids, and burst into the brothel's front room, a candle-lit salon crowded with rowdy, red-faced knights and laughing, languorous harlots.

'Save me!' cried Anyaka. 'Save me, gentles! He means to slay me!'

'Stop her!' bellowed Reiner. 'She's a sorceress! She's loosed a plague upon us!'

But both appeals were lost in a rising chorus of shrieks and curses as the nurglings erupted from the kitchen and fell upon the revellers. Harlots screamed and climbed the furniture, drunken knights roared and bashed at the nurglings with daggers, bottles and

candlesticks, shouting for their swords. In their inebriated state, the men did as much damage to each other as to the nurglings: wild swings cut fingers, mashed toes and bloodied noses. Fights broke out among friends.

In this carnage the nurglings flourished; raking eyes, biting hands and feet, opening veins in leg, neck and arm. All over the room harlots and soldiers alike shrieked as blood pumped from shredded arteries. Others fell to the floor with severed tendons to drown in a chittering swell of teeth and claws.

Caught in this mad whirlpool, Reiner and Anyaka continued their chase. Reiner felt like he was in a dream, where no matter how swiftly he ran, he moved only inches, but at last he cornered the sorceress in a romantic nook, complete with a love seat and plaster cherubs.

'Spare me!' cried Anyaka, piteously.

'As you spared Hennig?' Reiner pulled back for the killing thrust, but strong hands pinned his arms.

'How now, sir?' said a black-bearded knight. 'Do you violence to the good lady?'

'For shame,' said another, a blond giant with cavalry braids.

'She's not a good lady,' panted Reiner. 'She's a priestess of Nurgle!'

'Protect me, noble knights!' Anyaka begged. 'It is he who is a servant of Nurgle. It is he who has summoned these foul vermin.'

'A sorcerer, hey?' said the first knight. 'He has the look.'

'Don't believe her!' said Reiner desperately. 'She wears marks of Chaos carved into her very flesh. Open her robe and look for yourself.'

The blond knight punched him in the face. 'Swine! Dare you ask us to abuse a Sister of Shallya thus?'

Reiner spat blood. 'But she's...'

He was interrupted as a pack of nurglings discovered the party and attacked. Anyaka bolted from the alcove. Roaring in pain, the knights dropped Reiner and slashed at the nurglings with wild abandon.

Reiner wormed between the two giants, chopping at clinging nurglings as he went, and ran back into the salon. He spied Anyaka through the surging crowd, making for the kitchen. He plowed after her, and after a frantic push reached the kitchen and rushed through it. A serving maid sobbed, eyeless, in a corner. The cook lay sizzling in his cooking fire, dead from a thousand bites.

Reiner ran into the yard. Anyaka wasn't there. He limped quickly to the stable and listened. A murmur of chanting reached him.

Picking up a wooden bucket, he crept down the aisle past poor Hennig's bones to the tack room door, and listened again. The chanting continued unabated. He looked in. Anyaka had righted the frying pan and was once again filling it with poisonous ingredients, muttering over it all the while.

Reiner drew back. He hefted the bucket, took a deep breath, then spun into the door and hurled it. The bucket crashed into the brazier, overturning it, scattering hot coals and sending the frying pan flying.

Anyaka shrieked and fell back as boiling liquid splashed her. Reiner limped forward, sabre high, but the sorceress rolled away from him, around the fire. Reiner attempted to turn, but had to leap awkwardly over the spreading pool of poison and jarred his bad leg. Anyaka scrambled out of the door.

Reiner staggered after her, kicking through the fire that was spreading across the straw-covered floor. The stable aisle was empty, but he could hear the sorceress moaning from one of the stalls. He approached it cautiously. Anyaka was crooning as if enjoying the most sensuous pleasures imaginable. 'Lord Nurgle, I thank you for this glorious pain, for the poison that wracks my body so deliciously, for the gift of plague that I shall spread to all who feel my touch.'

Reiner looked into the stall. Anyaka huddled beside an exploded corpse, but as Reiner's flame-cast shadow crossed her, she looked up. He stepped back, aghast. The boiling poison had splashed her face, raising flame-red blisters from her left temple to her chin. Her lips on that side had shrivelled away from her teeth, and her left eye was a bulging white orb with no pupil, too big for its socket.

With an animal snarl the sorceress leapt at him, the corpse's curved Kislevite sword in her hand. Reiner parried, but her blow was so powerful it knocked his blade against his brow, stunning him. He fell back, Anyaka raining blows on him like twenty women. She was frighteningly strong, striking sparks with every slash. His sabre was soon so pitted it looked like a saw blade.

At last he bound her high, but she kicked him in the chest and he flew back, crashing against a stall. She advanced slowly, smiling, the fire from the tack room billowing into the aisle behind her.

'I congratulate you, my lord,' she said. 'You have stopped my plans from reaching fruition.' She raised her sword to her face and drew the honed edge down her scalded flesh, slicing open angry blisters. Thick yellow pus oozed out, coating the blade and eating into its steel. 'But there will be other camps, and other greedy fools ready to help a poor, Sister of Shallya in need.'

'You won't win many hearts with that face, lass,' said Reiner, struggling to get up.

'Grandfather will heal me, as he has before. He will hide my wounds and corruption within, so that I may walk among the populace undetected and spread his blessings to all.'

Reiner grimaced. 'I begin to be glad we didn't kiss.'

She lunged with the poison blade. Reiner blocked it an inch from his face. Its foul ichor choked him. He staggered back, and she pressed her attack, forcing him toward a mound of burning hay. The fire was spreading quickly. The posts that held the hayloft were trees of flame. Hot smoke burned Reiner's eyes, but he couldn't blink, couldn't let Anyaka past his guard, for the merest scratch from her blade would mean death. His lungs ached. His strength was waning, while hers seemed only to increase. He dodged a slash and fell backward over Hennig's bones. She knocked his sabre away into a flaming stall, then stepped over him, triumphant, raising her sword for the killing blow.

Reiner scrambled for something, anything, to throw, and grabbed Hennig's skull. He hurled it. It caught her on her blistered face. She barked in pain and stumbled back.

Reiner rolled to his feet and kicked her before she could recover. He looked frantically for a weapon. His sword was behind a wall of flame. A length of rope hung coiled on a peg. He grabbed it.

Anyaka lunged again. Reiner dodged and stepped behind her, looping the rope around her neck like a garrote. She flailed wildly. Her sword bit into his boot. Had she cut him? He couldn't tell.

He kicked her legs out from under her. She choked and thrashed again with her sword. He needed to get away from that poisoned steel. He threw two more loops of rope around her neck and knotted it, then jumped back.

Hissing like a cat, Anyaka scrambled at the rope, but before she could free herself, Reiner tossed the coil over a beam and hauled on it. Anyaka jerked into the air, kicking and retching. Reiner heaved again until she swung a yard off the ground. She dropped her sword and clawed at the makeshift noose.

Reiner laughed. 'Where's your grandfather now, witch?'

Anyaka turned flame-reflecting eyes on him, so filled with hate that, impossible as it was for her to reach him, Reiner still stepped back. She ceased struggling and began instead to spit out a rasping incantation while calmly moving her hands in sinuous patterns. A green glow began trailing from them. Fear gripped Reiner's heart as he felt invisible forces squeezing his windpipe, shutting off his breath like the rope shut off Anyaka's. He'd hung her, and she was still killing him.

Choking, eyes streaming from pain and smoke, Reiner darted forward and snatched Anyaka's poisoned blade from below her feet. She kicked feebly at him, still chanting.

Reiner's throat closed entirely. The world turned black and red and spun past his eyes. He swung the blade blindly and was rewarded with the satisfying bite of steel into flesh. Anyaka cried out. Her incantation stopped, and the pressure in Reiner's neck eased. He swung again and again, until the sorceress' screams stopped at last.

Reiner collapsed to the ground, sucking air as his throat opening fully. Hennig's skull looked at him, tilted at a jaunty angle. Reiner nodded to it. 'Thank you, lad. Well struck.'

The flames encroached from all sides. Reiner was just heaving himself up and make for the door when a group of men hurried through it.

'What's all this?' asked a familiar voice.

Reiner squinted through the smoke. It was captain Deiter Ulstaadt and the watch.

'Hetzau,' cried Deiter. 'I might have known. What in Sigmar's name have you done?'

'Saved the Empire,' coughed Reiner, staggering up. 'Or at least this little bit of it.'

'You call murdering a Sister of Shallya saving the Empire?'

'But she wasn't. She was a priestess of Nurgle. She meant to spread disease and confusion though the camp.'

Deiter scowled skeptically. 'This little thing? I don't believe it.'

Reiner waved behind him. 'Look in the tack room. She covered it with unholy symbols. She was brewing...'

The tack room collapsed in an explosion of falling beams and roaring flames. Reiner and Deiter and his men jumped back.

'Most convenient,' drawled Deiter.

'But, but... look at her. Look under her robes. She's carved marks of Chaos in her flesh!'

Deiter wrinkled his nose. 'You ask a Knight of the Banner to look upon a woman's nakedness?'

'No, you pompous ass!' cried Reiner, losing patience, 'I ask you to use your head for once in your miserable life!'

Deiter sniffed. 'I think we have had more than enough of that.' He motioned to his men. 'Bring him.'

The guardsmen marched Reiner out, still protesting, just seconds before the roof beam cracked and the stable collapsed.

In the yard, soldiers, knights and harlots had formed a bucket brigade to try and quench the fire, while the brothel's neighbours were draping their roofs and walls with wet blankets. Others were tending to those who had been maimed and killed by the nurgling invasion.

'He's the one!' shouted a pikeman, pointing at Reiner. 'He's the villain who lead those little horrors into the brothel.'

'And he the one who talk me into putting up sick people in first place,' said Madam Tolshnaya, bustling up importantly.

Deiter glared at Reiner. 'After I turned them away?'

'And I saw him earlier today,' said a handgunner. 'He kicked a body off a cart and it exploded with nurglings.'

'Actually, it exploded, then I kicked it off,' said Reiner weakly, but nobody was listening.

The burly acolyte of Morr pushed through the crowd. 'And he left a corpse at the mortuary that birthed a swarm of monsters!'

Deiter looked at Reiner in disgust. 'It becomes clear that it was you, not the Sister, who meant to spread disease and confusion, that it is you who is the servant of Chaos.' He raised his voice. 'Reiner Hetzau, in the name of our benevolent Emperor, Karl Franz, I arrest you for the crimes of murder, treason,

sorcery, and consorting with the enemy.' He turned to his men. 'Gentlemen, take him away.'

Reiner sighed as the guardsmen marched him to the street. It was just as Ranald taught. No good deed goes unpunished.



THE HANGMAN checked the lever again. The trap dropped and the sack of earth twitched at the end of the noose. It was late afternoon. The long shadow of the gallows touched Reiner's face. He turned away from the brig window. There was no laughter in him now. The sunset behind the gallows would be his last. No more dice. No more cards. No more women. No more fine food and drink. He hung his head. It wasn't fair. His life couldn't end like this. He had to escape. There must be a way!

If he could get out of the camp – out of the cell – he could make his way to the Sea of Claws. Then he might sail south to... anywhere really, anywhere the Empire's shadow didn't fall: Tilea, Estalia, the Border Princes. There were always opportunities for men of adventurous nature to be had there. All he had to do was get out of here.

He looked around with eyes refreshed by desperation: thick walls, iron bars, narrow windows. He couldn't break though all that, not by tomorrow morning, certainly. He stepped to the cell's heavy oak door. The lock looked simple enough, but picking locks was not a skill he'd learned, and smashing the door down was a foolish fantasy. It was as thick as the walls.

He looked through the door's tiny barred window. The turnkey sat on a stool just outside, picking his nose. Reiner brightened. He knew the man; a dull, stolid trooper he had dined with on many occasions – and taken many a reikmark from. It had been like stealing alms from a blind man. There was hope after all.

'Vassendorf, my lad,' he whispered through the bars. 'A word in your ear.' ♣

Reiner Hetzau's story continues in the novel *Valnir's Bane* by Nathan Long. Available in all good book stores.



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# GARDENS OF TYCHO

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*by Dan Abnett*



THE NATURE OF Master Dellac's line of business had never come up in conversation, and Valentin Drusher was in no position to ask impertinent questions. Certainly, Master Dellac was a successful man, one of the most conspicuously wealthy citizens on that dusty stretch of the Bone Coast. Drusher had an idea or two, but decided it was probably safer not to know. He just did what he was told. Two visits a week, after hours, to Master Dellac's mansion up in the hills, providing his specialist services on a private basis, in return for an agreed wage. And no questions asked, either way.

Sometimes, Master Dellac would supplement Drusher's payment with a gift: a smoked ham, a packet of expensive, dainty biscuits, perhaps even a bottle of imported wine. Drusher knew he could get good prices selling these items on later, but he always kept them for himself. It wasn't that he was greedy, or some kind of epicure (although, Throne knows, it had been a long, long time since Valentin Drusher had known any luxury in his life). It was simply because there was a line Drusher wasn't prepared to cross. So many aspects of his life, his respectability, and his good character, had been eroded over the years, he held on tight to those he still had.

Besides, he was a meek man, and he was too afraid of getting caught.

Late one Lauday evening, Drusher was making the return journey from Dellac's house to Kaloster. Drusher went to and from the mansion on foot, a solid journey of an hour each way. Dellac never offered him transport, even though he had a driver. Drusher tried to consider the biweekly trips the sort of decent exercise a man of his age ought to be getting, but by the time he returned to his habitat on Amon Street, he was always weary.

The sun had gone, leaving the sky over the small coastal town stained like pink marble. A night wind was picking up, sifting white dust from the dunes across the town road, and Kaloster itself seemed shuttered and dark.

There was no nightlife, no remission from the frugal, small-town quiet. But in addition to the payment in his coat pocket, Drusher carried a piece of good brisket in his satchel. He would eat well for the next few nights at least.

Amon Street was a tenement slope running down from Aquila Square to the rusty wharfs and the condemned fishworks. The buildings were drab brown with age and neglect, and their roofs were in need of repair. The air in the street stank because of the lime burner's just across the way. Drusher rented rooms on the fourth floor of number seventy.

A large black transporter with big chrome headlamps was parked just down the street. Drusher noticed it as he was fumbling for his key, but paid it little heed. He went up the narrow wooden staircase to his door.

It was only when he stepped into his little room, he realised someone was already there.

The man was robust and rather ugly. Heavy browed with a shock of thick, dark hair and a shapeless, asymmetric face, he wore a thick, high buttoned suit of black serge and a heavy leather stormcoat, also black. He was seated, casually, on the wooden pole-back chair behind the door, waiting.

'What are you-' Drusher began, his voice coming out thin and reedy.

'You Drusher?' the man asked.

'Yes. Why? What are you doing here? This is my...'

'Valentin Drusher?' the man pressed, glancing at a small dataslate in his left hand. 'Magos biologists? Says here you're forty seven. Is that right? You look older.'

'I am Valentin Drusher,' Drusher replied, too scared to be offended. 'What is this about? Who are you?'

'Sit down, magos. Over there, please. Put your satchel on the table.'

Drusher did as he was told. His pulse was thumping, and his skin had become clammy. He had an awful feeling he knew what this was about.

'I'm Falken,' the man said, and briefly flashed an identity warrant at him. Drusher swallowed as he glimpsed the silver seal of the magistratum, attached to which was a small orange ribbon that denoted the Martial

Order Division. 'How long have you been here on Gershom?'

'Ah, fourteen years. Fourteen years this winter.'

'And here in Kaloster?'

'Just eighteen months.'

The man looked at his dataslate again. 'According to Central Records, you are employed by the Administratum to teach Natural History at the local Scholam.'

'That's correct. My papers are in order.'

'But you're a magos biologist, not a teacher.'

'Employment prospects on this world are not great for a man of my calling. I take what work I can. The teaching stipend offered by the Administratum keeps a roof over my head.'

The man pursed his lips. 'If the employment prospects for your kind are thin on the ground, magos, it begs the question why you came to Gershom in the first place. Let alone why you chose to stay here for fourteen years.'

Despite his fear, Drusher felt piqued. This was the old injustice again, back to haunt him. 'When I came to this world, sir, I was gainfully employed. The Lord Governor himself was my patron. He commissioned me to produce a complete taxonomy of the planet's fauna. The work took seven years, but at the end of it, complications arose...'

'Complications?'

'A legal matter. I was forced to stay on for another two years, as a witness. All the money I had earned from the commission ran out. By the time the case was settled, I could no longer afford passage to another world. I have been here ever since, making a living as best I can.'

The man, Falken, didn't seem very interested. In Drusher's experience, no one ever was. On a downtrodden outworld like Gershom, everyone had their own sob story.

'You keep glancing at your satchel, magos,' Falken remarked suddenly. 'Why is that?'

Drusher swallowed hard again. He had never been any good at lying. 'Sir,' he said quietly, 'could you tell me... I mean, would things go better for me if I made a full confession now?'

Falken blinked, as if surprised, then smiled. 'That's a good idea,' he said, sitting down to face Drusher across the low table where the satchel sat. 'Why don't you do just that?'



'I'm not proud of this,' said Drusher. 'I mean, it was stupid. I knew the magistratum would find out eventually. It's just... things have been so tight.'

'Go on.'

'The Administratum pays me a stipend for my services, along with certain ration benefits as per the Martial Order. This is of course contingent on me not... on me not supplementing my earnings.'

Naturally,' nodded Falken. 'If you break the terms, there is a penalty. It can be severe.'

Drusher sighed, and showed Falken the contents of his satchel. 'There is a man, a local businessman, who employs me, two evenings a week. It is a private arrangement. He pays me in cash, no questions asked.'

'How much?'

'Two crowns per evening. He has a daughter. For her, he retains my services...'

Falken looked at the things Drusher was showing him.

'You do this with his daughter?'

'Yes. Sometimes he watches.'

Falken got up. 'I see. This is a pretty picture, isn't it?' For some reason, Falken seemed to be stifling a smile, as if something amused him terribly.

'Am I in serious trouble?' Drusher asked.

'You'll have to come with me,' Falken said. 'To Tycho.'

'To Tycho?'

'The Marshal wants to speak with you.'

'Oh Throne!' Drusher gasped. 'I thought perhaps a fine...'

'Pack your things, magos. All of them. I'll give you five minutes.'

Drusher had very few belongings. They fitted into two small bags. Falken didn't offer to carry either of them down to the transporter.

It was dark now, fully night. When the transporter's engine turned over, the glare of the headlights filled the depths of Amon Street.

Drusher sat up front, beside the magistratum officer. They drove up through the town, onto the coast highway, and turned south.

THE CITIES OF the Southern Peninsula, Tycho amongst them, had been the arena of a savage civil war that had raged for over ten years. The popular separatist movement had finally been defeated by government forces two years earlier, but by then the war had critically weakened Gershom's already ailing economy. Strict, Imperial martial order had been imposed throughout the Peninsula and right up through the Bone Coast into the Eastern Provinces.

The civil war had stained the air with smoke, and poisoned the coastal waters, killing off the fishing industry. The cities of the Peninsula were urban ruins where the Martial Order Division worked to re-establish Imperium law and support the impoverished civilian population.

Falken drove for two hours without speaking. The vox-set under his dashboard, tuned down, crackled with magistratum traffic like it was talking in its sleep. Drusher stared out of the window at the darkness and the occasional black ruin that loomed out of it. This was it, he felt. Gershom was his nemesis. It had lured him in, a bright young man with an equally bright future before him, and it had trapped him like a fettle fly in amber. It had drained him dry, throttled his spirit, made him destitute.

And now this, after all his efforts to earn a crust to live, let alone a ticket off-world, it was going to destroy him. Disgrace. Shame. Perhaps a custodial sentence.

'I don't deserve this,' he murmured.

'What's that?' asked Falken at the wheel.

'Nothing.'

They began to pass through armoured roadblocks where magistratum troopers wearing the orange ribbon of the Martial Order Division waved Falken through. They were entering the Peninsula proper now, the real war-zone. Ghost cities, tumbled and forlorn, drifted past, lit by searchlights and military beacons. The dark landscape outside the transporter became a phosphorescent waste of fragile walls and empty habs.

Tycho was the principle city of the Peninsula region, and when they drove in through its empty streets, four hours after leaving Kaloster, Drusher saw a miserable calamity of twisted girders, piled rubble and smoke-blackened buildings. His face, half-lit by the luminous dials of the dashboard, reflected back to him off the window, superimposed on the ruins. Pale, thin, bespectacled, the hair thin and grey. Drusher wasn't sure if he resembled the wastes of Tycho, or if they resembled him.



They pulled up outside a mouldering ouslute monolith in the city centre.

'Leave your bags,' Falken said, getting out. 'I'll have them brought in.'

Drusher followed him in through the towering entrance. Magistratum officers hurried to and fro in the echoing atrium, and limp Imperium flags hung from the roof. There was a smell of antiseptic.

'This way,' Falken said.

He led Drusher to a room on the fifth floor. The elevators were out and they had to use the stairs. Falken made him wait outside the heavy double doors.

The hallway was cold, and night air seeped in through the cracked windowpanes at the far end. Drusher paced up and down. He could hear the rattle and clack of cogitators in nearby rooms, and an occasional shout from down below. Then he heard laughter from behind the double doors.

Falken emerged. He was still chuckling. 'You can go in now,' he said.

Drusher walked in, the doors closing behind him. The office was large and grim, a single metal desk planted on a threadbare rug. Half a dozen wire-basket carts heavily laden with dog-eared dossiers and files. A cogitator, whirring to itself. Faded spaces on the walls where pictures had once hung.

'Throne. I wouldn't have recognised you, magos,' said a voice.

She was standing by the deep windows, silhouetted against the night-time city outside. He knew the voice at once.

'Macks?'

Germaine Macks stepped forward to meet him, a smile on her lips. Her hair was still short, her face still lean, the old, tiny zigzag scar above the left-hand side of her mouth still visible. The other, newer scar on her forehead was half hidden under her fringe.

'Hello, Valentin,' she said. 'What's it been now? Five years?'

He nodded. 'Deputy Macks...'

She shook her head. 'It's Magistratum Marshal Macks now. Chief of Martial Order, Tycho city.'

He stiffened. 'Mamzel, I can explain everything. I hope the fact that you know me of old might mitigate the...'

'Falken was playing with you, magos.'

'Excuse me, what?'

Macks sat down behind her desk. 'I sent Falken up the coast to get you. Throne knows why you started confessing things to him. Guilty conscience, Valentin?'

'I...' Drusher stammered.

'Falken was beside himself. He told me he didn't think he could keep a straight face on the journey down here. Did you think you were in trouble?'

'He... that is... I...'

'Teaching the daughter of some small-time racketeer the art of watercolour painting? To supplement the pittance Admin pays you? Come on, Valentin! I'd hardly spare a chief investigator to go all that way to bring you in. You criminal mastermind, you.'

Drusher felt a little giddy. 'May I sit down?' he asked.

She nodded, still chuckling, and reached into a desk drawer for a bottle of amasec and two shot glasses.

'Get this inside you, you filthy recidivist,' she grinned, handing one glass to him.

'I really don't understand what's going on...' Drusher said.

'Neither do I,' she said. 'That's why I want some help. Some expert help. I said you weren't in trouble, and I was lying. You're not in personal trouble, but there is trouble here. And I'm about to drop you right in it.'

'Oh,' he said.

'Drink up,' Macks said. 'You'll need it where we're going.'



'IN YOUR EXPERT opinion,' she said, 'what did that?'

Drusher took a long, slow look, then excused himself. Coming up, the amasec was a lot hotter and more acid than it had felt going down.

'All right?' she said.

He wiped his mouth, and nodded reluctantly. Macks took a little pot out of her uniform pocket and smeared what looked like grease under her nose. She reached out and did the same to Drusher. The fierce camphor smell of osscil filled his sinuses.

'Should have done that before I took you in,' Macks apologised. 'Old medicae mortus trick. It masks the stench of decay.'

She led him back into the morgue. The place was chilly, and tiled with mauve enamel squares. There were brass plugholes every few metres across the floor, and in the distance, Drusher could hear water pattering from a leaky scrub-hose. High-gain glow-strips, sharp and white, filled the chamber with a light like frost.

The cadaver lay on a steel gurney beside an autopsy unit. Other shapes, tagged and covered in red sheets, lurked nearby on other trolleys.

'All right to take another look?' Macks asked.

Drusher nodded.

She folded the red shroud back.

The man was naked, his body as white and swollen as cooked seafood. His hands, feet and genitals seemed shrivelled with cold, and the fingernails stood proud and dark. The hairs on his chest and pubis were black and looked like insect legs.

He must have been about one eighty in life, Drusher figured, fighting back another wave of nausea. Heavy set. Bruises of lividity marked his lumbar region, and there were other darker blue bruises around his ribs.

The front of his face, and most of his throat, had been bitten away. Parts of the skull structure had gone along with the soft tissue. Cleanly severed, like industrial shears had...

Drusher gagged, and looked aside.

'Animal, right?' Macks said.

Drusher mumbled something.

'Was that a yes?'

'It would appear to be a bite,' Drusher said, his voice very tiny. 'Very deep and strong. And then... the suggestion of some feeding. Around the face and neck.'

'Animal, right?' she repeated.

'I suppose. Nothing human could have... bitten like that.'

'I measured the bite radius. Just like you taught me. Remember, in Outer Udar? I measured it.'

'That's good.'

'Twenty centimetres. And I checked too. No tooth fragments. This was clean. I mean, it just bit his face right off.'

Drusher turned slowly. 'Macks? What am I doing here?'

'Helping my investigation,' she said. 'I thought we'd covered that. I'm in charge down here in this neck of the woods, with plenty enough problems to contend with, I can tell you... and then this crap happens. I look for an expert, and lo and behold I find

magos biologis Valentin Drusher, my old pal, working as a teacher in Kaloster. So I thought, Macks, I thought, that's perfect. We worked together so well before, and this clearly needs a biologist expert.'

'That's great...'

'Valentin, cheer up. There's money in this. I'll bill your hours out to the magistratum, and you'll get three times what the Administratum was paying you. Expert witness and all.'

'You're running the Martial Order program here in Tycho and you pull strings like that to get me to consider one case?'

'No,' said Macks. 'I should have explained that too, I guess. This isn't the only victim.'

'How many others?' he asked.

Macks made a vague gesture that encompassed all the other gurneys in the chamber. Twenty five, thirty, maybe more.

'You're joking?'

'I wish I was. Something is chomping its way through the population.'

Drusher steeled himself and turned back to the exposed corpse, switching his standard glasses for his reading pair. 'A fluorescing lamp, please. And a close glass.'

She handed him the glass from the autopsy cart and help the lamp up, bathing the dead man's devastated skull with blue light.

Drusher picked up a steel probe and gently excised the lip of one of the revealed bone edges. He fought to keep his gorge down.

'No tooth fragments.'

'I told you.'

'I mean nothing,' he said. 'Not even the bacillus residue one would expect from the wound mark of a predator. This wasn't an animal. It's not a bite.'

'What?'

'It's too clean. I'd say you were looking for a man with a chainsword.'

Macks shook her head. 'No.'

'Why no?'

'Because if there was a maniac with a chainsword running around downtown Tycho, I'd know about it. This is animal, Valentin.'

'How can you be so sure?' he asked.

'Come on,' she said. 'I'll show you.'



THE HEADLAMPS OF her transporter picked out the sign over the wrought iron gateway.

*The Gardens of Tycho.*

'Well-stocked before the civil war,' she said, pulling on the wheel. 'The biggest xenozoological exhibit on the planet. The local governor had a thing about exotic animals.'

'And?'

'And, Valentin, it was bombed during the war. Some animals were killed, but many more escaped. I think something from here is roaming the ruins of Tycho, hungry, neglected, killing people.'

'And that's why...' he began.

'That's why I need a magos biologists,' she finished.

They pulled up and got out. The gardens were dark and quiet. It was still two hours before dawn. There was an awful damp reek in the air, emanating from the empty cages and the dank rockcrete pens.

Macks had given Drusher a stablight, and carried one of her own. They walked together, their footsteps gritty and crisp on the ground, playing the beams around.

The Gardens of Tycho had not been a sophisticated collection. Drusher remembered the spectacular xeno-fauna halls of Thracian Primaris that he had visited as a young man. There, the pens and enclosures had been encoded to create perfect habitats for the precious specimens, often with their own atmospheres, their own gravities even.

Such expertise – and the money to realise it – had not been available on Tycho. These were simple cages and, in places, armoured holding tanks, where exotic creatures from the far-flung corners of the Imperium had lived out their days on Gershom in miserable confinement.

Drusher knew exactly how they felt.

'If it's been caged like this, Macks, it will perhaps have become psychotic,' he said.

'The animal?'

'The animal. It's common in poor conditions such as these. Animals held in crude cages often develop behavioural problems. They become unpredictable. Violent.'

'But if it's a predator anyway...' she began.

'Even predators have patterns. The need to hunt, to breed, to territorialise. Limit those things, and you break the pattern.'

'That's important why?' she asked.

'If this animal is a carnivore, and I would suspect as much, it isn't feeding on its kills. Well, only minimally. It is killing simply to kill.'

'Like the hill beast?' she murmured, thinking back to that haunted winter in Outer Udar.

'No,' he said. 'That beast was different. Killing was its behaviour. Here we have aberration.'

As they walked further, Drusher began to see the awful damage done in the course of the war. Bomb-shattered pens, mounds of rubble, plasteel cages shorn from their mounting blocks.

And bones.

There were corpses in the intact pens too. Limp sacks of dried flesh, scattered vertebrae, the lingering stench of dung and decay. A row of wire domes that had once held rare birds were now littered with bright feathers. Tufts of down caked the wire mesh, evidence of frantic, starving attempts to be free. They reminded Drusher of Baron Karne's poultry stoops.

'We thought everything had died,' Macks said. 'The stink when we first came down here. I mean, nothing had been fed or cleaned out in months. Everything in a sealed cage was dead, except some kind of emaciated dromedary horse, which had been living off its own fat deposits, and even that died a few days after we freed it. And everything in the bombed cages we figured was wiped out, although there are some finch-monkeys loose in the Lower Bowery, freaking little things, and Falken swears he saw a grazer on Lemand Street one night, though I say he was drunk.'

'So if something's loose, it came from the bomb damaged cages?' Drusher said.

She shrugged. 'Unless some well-intentioned citizen came along during the war, and let something out and then locked the cage again. Some of them seem to be empty, though the collection's manifest doesn't say if they were just unstocked pens. It's years out of date.'

'You have a manifest?'

Macks nodded and produced a dataslate from her coat. 'I've highlighted any item that was caged in the bombed area, and also anything connected to an empty cage. Throne, Valentin, I haven't the first clue what half of them are. So glad to have an expert on board.'

He started to look at the list. 'So it could be anything highlighted, or anything at all, given the fact that the stock might have been changed or rotated after this list was made?'

She was about to reply when her vox-link chimed. The sharp little note made Drusher jump. Macks took the call.

'We have to go,' she said, turning to head back to the exit. 'I've been called in. Some drunken idiots brawling in a tavern after curfew.'

'Do I have to come?' he said.

She turned back and shone her stablight in his face. 'No. Why, would you like to stay here?'

Drusher glanced around.

'Not really,' he said.



**T**HEY DROVE THROUGH streets that were deserted but for burned-out vehicles and the occasional magistratum transport rushing off on a response. He sat in the passenger seat, studying the slate, rocked by the jolts of the uneven roadway. Relief was beginning to seep into him, relief that he wasn't bound for disgrace and a custodial sentence after all. A little part of him hated Falken for his trick, but a greater part despised himself for being so foolish. Gershom wasn't his nemesis. Valentin Drusher was his own worst enemy, and his ruined life was testament to the way he had studiously taken every wrong turn destiny had ever offered him.

'Your hair's gone grey,' Macks said, her eyes on the road.

He looked up. 'I stopped dying it.'

'You dyed your hair?' she asked.

He didn't reply.

'So you've matured out of that vanity, then, Valentin?' she smirked.

'No. I just couldn't afford the treatment anymore.'

She laughed, but he was sure he detected some sympathy in her tone.

'I like it,' she said after a while. 'It's distinguished.'

'You haven't changed at all,' he said.

She pulled the vehicle to a halt outside a battered townhouse where magistratum officers were attempting to restrain nine or

ten brawling men. There was blood on the pavement, and the air was lit by the blinking lamps of the armoured patrol vehicles.

Macks got out. 'Stay here,' she said. She peered back at him through the open door. 'So, is that a good thing?'

'What?' he asked.

'The fact that I haven't changed?'

'I never thought you needed much improvement,' he replied, immediately appalled that he'd made such a bold remark out loud.

Macks laughed, then slammed the door.

In the sealed quiet of the transporter, Drusher watched for a while as she waded in with her riot baton and brought order to the scene. Then he turned his attention back to the dataslate.

Time passed.

The driver's door opened, and the transporter rocked on its springs as she clambered back in.

'I think we're looking for a carnodon,' he said.

'Yeah?' she said, gunning the engine and throwing the vehicle forward in a rapid acceleration.

'Yes. I mean, working from the details here. I could be wrong if the specimens were changed after this list was made up, but it's a simple process of elimination.'

'Is it?' she asked, throwing them round a street corner so fast the tyres squealed.

'There were only four predators listed in the bombed-out pens. Discount the Mirepoix treecreeper because it's an injector, not a biter.'

'A what?'

'It injects its prey with a long proboscis and dissolves the internal organs, sucking them out.'

'Enough.'

'I mean, it doesn't have a mouth.'

'All right, all right.'

'So, no bite wounds.'

'Right.'

'Right, so the saurapt from Brontotaph is off the list as well.'

Macks changed down and raced them along another empty boulevard. 'Because?'

'Because it's the size of a hab block. Falken wouldn't have had to be drunk to spot it already.'

She grinned.



'And the pouncer here, from Lamsarotte, we can cross that off too. It's a felid, but far too slight to cause the wounds you showed me. Besides, I doubt it would have lasted long in this climate outside a heated pen.'

'So we're left with the, what did you call it?' she asked.

'Carnodon. From Gudrun. Throne, there shouldn't have been one in captivity here. They're virtually extinct, and listed on the Administratum's prohibition order. It's a felid too, but big, and from temperate habitats.'

'How big?'

'Five or six metres, maybe eight hundred kilos. Quite capable of biting off a man's face.'

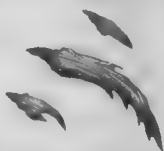
'So, magos biologis, how do we catch a carnodon?' she asked, heaving on the wheel.

Drusher looked up. 'We're... we're going rather fast, Macks,' he said. 'Another call?'

'Yes,' she replied.

'Another breach of curfew?' he asked.

Macks shook her head. 'Question stands, Valentin. How do we catch a carnodon?'



**T**HE HABS WERE clustered together at the northern extremity of the town, gathered in tight, conspiratorial knots. Acres of wasteland surrounded each stack, littered with the flotsam of war and poverty. Much of the intense fighting during the civil war had taken place in this shell-damaged suburb.

Macks slowed the transporter and guided it in between piles of shattered bricks. They were approaching one of the most ramshackle towers. Ahead, the lamps picked out a pair of magistratum transporters, parked near the stack's loading dock. A heavy morgue carrier was pulled up beside them, its rear hatch gaping.

'Come on,' Macks said.

Drusher got out into the cold, pre-dawn air. The rectangular habs stood stark against a sky slowly paling into a gold sheen. He smelled the sweet rot of garbage, and the unpleasant odour of wet rockcrete.

'Bring your stablight,' she said, making off across the rough ground to the group of magistratum officers waiting by the stack entrance. She spoke to a couple of them, then signalled Drusher to follow her.

They entered the wide doorway and began to climb the crude stairwell.

'They've held off so you can get the first look at the scene,' she said.

Drusher took a deep breath. They climbed to the fifth floor.

'Hurry up,' she called back to him.

'Hang on,' he said. Drusher stooped to examine the rough wall, touching a dark patch amongst the lichen with his fingertips, then sniffing them.

'You'll catch something,' Macks said, coming back down the stairs to join him.

'I thought that's why you hired me,' he said. 'Smell this. Ammonia, very strong. Other natural chemicals, pheromones. This is a territorial mark. The animal spranted here.'

'What?'

'It scent-marked the wall with urine.'

'And you wanted me to sniff it?'

Drusher looked up at her. 'It's textbook felid behaviour. The stain suggests quantity, so we're looking at something large.'

'Carnodon?'

'It fits.'

'See if this fits too,' she said.



**T**HE DERELICT HAB stack had become home for vagrants, and it was rare for these dispossessed souls to have any contact with the magistratum. But one of them had been scared enough to raise the alarm, having heard a commotion on the fifth floor.

The stack apartment was a four room affair, a kitchen-diner, a bed vault, a lounge and washroom cubicle. The place stank of mildew.

And another smell Drusher hadn't encountered since Outer Udar.

Blood.

The magistratum crew had set up pole lamps to mark the scene, and it had been picted and recorded.

'Watch your step,' Macks said.

As they went in, the smell became more intense. The corpse was in the lounge area. Even Macks, hardened to the uglier aspects of life, had to turn aside for a moment.

The body was that of an older female. The legs, swathed in filthy hose and support stockings, were intact. The torso had been stripped down to the bones, and these had been broken open so that something feeding could get at the soft organs. There was no head, no arms.

'They tell me the head's in there,' Macks said, indicating the kitchen area.

Drusher peered in through the doorway, glimpsing a brown, cracked object that looked like a broken earthenware pot. Except that it still had a residue of grey hair.

'What's this?' Macks called. In the bedroom, her torch beam was illuminating a brown, fractured stick.

'Arm bone,' said Drusher. 'Broken open to get at the marrow.' He was remarkably composed. This was perhaps the most horrific sight that had ever greeted his eyes, but a professional detachment was masking his revulsion. The magos biologists in him was fascinated by the killing.

'I think she was already dead,' he said. 'This is scavenging. A decent post will be able to confirm it. The feeder was big, but it took its time. Leisurely feeding, reducing the cadaver piece by piece, going for the most nutritional areas first. There was no struggle, no kill, although the carnodon probably made quite a bit of noise as it rendered down the carcass.'

'Carnodon?' she said. 'You're sure?'

'I'd stake my professional credentials on it,' he replied. 'For what that's worth.'

'Okay,' Macks breathed heavily. 'Can we get them in to clear this?'

'Yes,' Drusher said.

'And can you work up something? I don't know - a library pict, maybe one of your dandy watercolour sketches, so we know what we're looking for?'

'Glad to,' he replied.

'Good,' Macks said. 'You look like you need sleep.'

He shrugged. 'Where is the magistratum putting me up?' he asked.

Macks replied, 'We'll find somewhere.'



SOMEWHERE TURNED OUT to be a torn couch in the empty room next door to Macks's office. It appeared from the stale

bedclothes that someone else had been sleeping there on a regular basis. Drusher was too tired to complain. Besides, as far as his relationship with the planet Gershom went, this was pretty much par for the course.

He fell asleep within minutes of laying down.

He woke with a start and found he'd only been sleeping for a couple of hours. It was barely dawn. As was often the case, rest had freed up his mind, and there was now an idea buzzing around in it so busily it had woken him. He felt strangely enervated. After years of tedious dead-end employment, he was finally calling on his primary area of expertise again, using old skills that he had begun to believe had long since atrophied. He almost felt like a magos biologists.

Drusher got up, tucked in his shirt and put on his shoes. The building was quiet and dead. He went into the hallway and tapped on the door of Macks's office. When he got no reply, he let himself in and started to rummage amongst the dossiers piled on the wire carts.

He heard a metallic click behind him and turned. Macks, her hair tousled, stood behind the desk. The sidearm she had aimed at him was slowly lowering.

'It's you,' she grunted, her eyes puffy with sleep.

'Throne!' he said. 'Where were you?'

Rubbing her face, she gestured at the floor behind the desk, where Drusher could now see a few seat cushions and a crumpled blanket.

'You were sleeping on the floor under your desk?' he said.

She cleared her throat and holstered the sidearm in her belt pouch. She looked pissed off and weary. 'Well, you got my bed, didn't you?' she snapped.

'Oh,' he said.

Macks picked up her boots and shuffled across to the office door. She leaned out and yelled 'Watch officer! Two caffienes before I shoot someone!' Then she sat down on the rug and started to pull on her footwear.

'What time is it?' she asked Drusher grumpily.

'Early yet. I'm sorry.'

'What were you doing?'

'I wanted to check the autopsy files. From the victims. There was something I wanted to look at.'

'That pile there,' Macks said. 'No, the other end.'

Drusher started to look through the files, wincing at some of the more grisly pics he encountered. Macks left the room, presumably to kill whoever it was that was being slow with the caffeine.

When she returned, he'd spread a dozen of the dossiers out on the rug, and was making notes with a slate and stylus he'd borrowed from her desk.

'Macks,' he began. 'There's something here that-'

'Get your jacket,' she said.



**I**N DAYLIGHT (though daylight was a loose term) Tycho didn't look any better.

From the side window of the speeding transporter, Drusher could now starkly see what had been merely spectral ruins the night before. There had been a melancholy air to the place in the darkness. Now everything was blunt and crass: the scars of fire, the pitting of assault weapons, the water-filled cavities of craters, the shock-fractures on slabs of rockcrete. Weeds fumed the city ruins, thick and unlovely, reclaiming the wasteground between tenements and stacks. The Gardens of Tycho were everywhere now, Drusher thought. The wild was reclaiming the city.

They drove in convoy with two other magistratum vehicles, rattling down the empty thoroughfares.

'Fresh kill,' was all Macks would say. 'In the Commission of Works.'

Falken was already on site, with four armed troopers in tow. Drusher wouldn't have been able to tell that the building before him was the Commission of Works. Penetrator shells had caved in the facade and chewed curiously geometric shapes out of the roof. The rear of the building was a dark cave-system of intact rooms.

'In here,' said Falken, shouldering his riotgun and leading them into the mangled ruins. 'Routine sweep picked it up about thirty minutes ago.'

They clambered over fallen beams, disturbing the thick, white dust. The body lay in a nest of broken floorboards.

'Civilian volunteer,' Falken said. 'He was on a registered night watch here. He had a weapon, but it doesn't seem like he got the chance to use it.'

The man lay on his side, facing them as they approached with a face that was no longer there. Something had severed his skull laterally in a line from the point of the chin to the apex of the skull. It looked to Drusher like an anatomical crosscut pic from a surgery text manual.

Drusher knelt down beside the body. The linear precision of the bite was baffling.

'Did you sweep?' Macks was asking Falken.

'A brief look. Rimbaud thinks he heard something.'

Macks looked at the trooper. 'Really?'

'Up at back, mam,' Rimbaud said. 'There was definitely something moving around. I think it's still here.'

'Is that likely?' Macks asked Drusher.

He shrugged. 'If it was disturbed before it could feed... I suppose so.'

'Let's go,' she ordered. She and Falken moved ahead, weapons lowered. 'Valentin, you're up,' she called back. 'Stick with Edvin. The rest of you cover the front. Rimbaud, show us where.'

They moved into the dark, crumbling hulk of the ruin, every footstep kicking up dust. Falken, Rimbaud and Macks made their way up a staircase that was hanging off the remains of a supporting wall. Edging forward with the trooper named Edvin, Drusher could hear the others walking about on the floor above, creaking the distressed floor, sifting dust down at them in hourglass trickles. Drusher could also hear Edvin's vox, turned low.

'To your left now,' that was Falken.

'Don't get too far ahead,' Macks replied.

'Something! No, false alarm.'

Edvin glanced nervously at Drusher. 'Okay there, sir?' he asked.

Drusher nodded.

'Some kind of cat?' the trooper asked.

'Some kind.' Drusher replied. He was becoming very aware of the beat of his own heart.

When it happened, it happened with such ferocity and speed, Drusher barely had time to react. There was a fantastic, booming detonation – in hindsight, presumably Falken's riotgun discharging – swiftly followed by a series of pistols shots on auto. At the same

time, the vox went mad with strangled calls. The floor above Drusher shook with a violent frenzy. There was an impact, a crash. A scream. Two more blasts from a riotgun.

'What the Throne' Edvin began, raising his weapon and looking up.

The floor above them caved in. Drusher and Edvin were knocked flat and almost buried in a cascade of broken joists, planks and falling bricks. Mortar dust filled the atmosphere like a fog, choking and stifling. Another gunshot.

Drusher struggled to his feet, pushing the broken floorboards off his legs. He could barely breathe. Edvin was on his face, unconscious. Something heavy had come straight down through the floor and landed on him, half-crushing him.

Drusher blinked. 'No!' he cried.

The something heavy was the body of a magistratum trooper, faceless, blood jetting forcibly from severed arteries. The blood sprayed up the walls, gleaming like rubies in the dust.

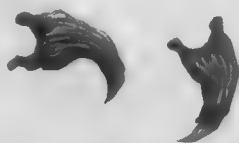
'Macks!' he cried. 'Macks!'

He tried to reach her, though he knew it was far too late. Then something else came down through the hole in the floor. Something fast and dark and feral. It was the animal, the killer, trying to find an escape route.

It slammed Drusher over hard with one flailing limb and he crashed into a plasterboard wall that shattered like old marzipan icing.

For a moment, just a fleeting second before he passed out, he glimpsed it. The shape.

The shape.



**H**E CAME ROUND staring up at Falken's face. 'He's all right,' Falken spat and turned away, wiping dust off his face.

Drusher sat up fast, his head pounding. 'Macks? Macks?'

'What?' she asked.

Drusher saw her, crouched in the rubble in front of him. Falken was getting the dazed Edvin back on his feet.

'Macks?'

She was leaning over the body. Drusher got up, and could see now the mutilated corpse was Rimbaud.

'It got away,' Macks murmured. 'It got Rimbaud and then it got away.' Falken was shouting for the other troopers to sweep the rear of the building.

'What happened?' Drusher asked.

'I didn't see it,' Macks said. 'Falken saw something move and fired. Then it all went to hell.'

'It came down this way. After it had...' Drusher paused. 'It followed Rimbaud's body down.'

'You see it?'

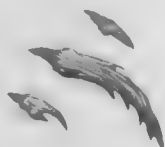
'I didn't get a proper look,' Drusher said.

Macks cursed and walked away. Drusher crouched down beside the trooper's body and turned it slightly so he could look at the wound. The same clean, ghastly cut right across the face. But this time, a second one, abortive, made behind the line of the excising blow, as if the predator had been in a frenzy – alarmed, perhaps – and had made a first hasty strike before following it up. Even so the first strike, deep and into the side of the neck and head, would have killed Rimbaud outright.

But even in haste, so clean. So straight.

'A cat? A cat did that?' Drusher looked round. Edvin, blood dribbling from a cut above his left eye, was staring at his friend's body.

'That's what the experts say,' Drusher replied.



**T**HEY DROVE BACK to the magistratum HQ in silence. The sweep had picked up nothing. The killer had melted into the ruins beyond the Commission of Works as fast as frost in summertime.

'You thought it was me, didn't you?' Macks asked finally.

'What?'

'The body. I heard you cry out. You thought it had got me.'

Drusher nodded. He felt they might be about to have a moment, something honest that approximated intimacy. He was prepared to admit how much he would care if anything happened to her.

'If you can't tell the difference between me and a hairy-arsed male trooper,' she said, 'I'm not holding out much hope for your observational expertise.'

He looked over at her. 'Screw you too, Macks.'



**S**HE LEFT HIM alone in her office, and let him get on with sorting the dossiers. A staffer brought him a cup of something over-brewed and over-sweetened late in the afternoon. By then, he was pinning things to the walls, and had switched to paper to make his notes. He accessed Macks's cogitator, and called up some city-plan maps.

Macks came back just as it was getting dark outside.

'I'm glad you're here,' he said. 'There's something I need to show you.'

She seemed cheerful, upbeat. 'Something I have to show you first,' she said.

Macks led him down to the morgue. A crowd of officers and uniformed staffers had gathered and there was almost a party atmosphere. Falken was passing round bottles of contraband amasec so everyone could take a slug.

'Here he is!' Falken cried. 'Magos biologis Dresher!'

There was some clapping.

'Drusher,' Drusher said.

'Whatever,' Falken said, putting his arm around Drusher's shoulders. 'Couldn't have done it without you, friend! Really, you were on the money! Eh? What do think? Is this a... a...'

'Carnodon,' Drusher said, painfully aware of how big Falken was beside him, squeezing him in the hug.

The felid had been laid across four gurneys, heavy and limp in death. Its tusked snout seemed to grimace, as if it, like Drusher, wished it was somewhere else. Small, dark punctures in its belly showed where Falken had shot it.

'May I?' Drusher asked, and Falken let him go over and examine the beast. The crowd turned back to toasting and laughing.

It had once been a wonderful thing, master of its world, afraid of nothing. An apex predator. Drusher smiled sadly as he

thought of the phrase. A big specimen too, maybe five and a half metres body length, nine hundred kilos healthy body weight. But at the time of its miserable, hunted death, it had been less than six hundred kilos, emaciated, its ribs poking out like tent braces. It was old too, post-mature. The coat was raddled by sarcoptic mange and laden with lice, fungus and parasites. Drusher ran his hand along its flank anyway. So knotted, gristly, starved. He peeled back the black lips and examined the dentition.

'Where did you get it?' he called out to Falken.

'In the cellars under the Lexicon,' Falken said, coming over. 'We got a heads up. We'd circulated your picture, you see. Thanks for that. I went in, saw it, and boom-boom.'

Drusher nodded.

'Truth be told,' Falken said, dropping his voice, 'it didn't put up much of a fight. But I wasn't taking any chances.'

'I understand.'

Falken turned back to the crowd. 'For Onnie Rimbaud, poor bastard!' he cried. 'This one's for you, son!'

Falken offered the nearest bottle to Drusher. Drusher shook his head. 'Thanks for your help, Dresher,' Falken said.

'Drusher.'

Macks came over.

'I want to thank you on behalf of the Division, Valentin,' she said. 'You got us our result. I'll bill the Administratum for a whole week, fair enough? Go get your things together. Someone will drive you home this evening.'

Drusher nodded.



**I**HAVE A transporter waiting,' Macks said. Drusher's bags were in a neat stack beside the office door. He was just closing the last of the dossiers and sliding them back onto her carts.

'Right,' he said.

'Well, it's been good to have you on board. Thanks. Like old times, right?'

'Like Outer Udar, Macks? I get the distinct impression you remember that more fondly than I do.'

'Things'll work out, Valentin,' she said.



'Before I go,' he said, 'I'd like you to look at something.'

'What?'

'Let's put it this way. I'd hate to have you come all the way up the coast to get me again.'

Macks frowned. 'What are you on about now?'

'The killer wasn't - isn't - that cat.'

Macks wiped her hand across her lips as if encouraging patience. 'Go on.'

'I said from the start it wasn't an animal.'

'You also told me to look for a carnodon.'

'Let me show you something,' Drusher said. He held up a data-slate. The compact screen showed a display of the city, overlaid with rune symbols. 'I've done some collating. See here? I've mapped all the sites where the victims were found. Thirty two bodies.'

'I did that myself, on an ongoing basis. I saw nothing. No pattern, no discernible spread.'

'I agree,' said Drusher. 'I mean, there's a certain concentration of kill-sites here, in this crescent, but most of the others are too wayward, too random.'

'So?'

'That first body you showed me, in the morgue. So cleanly, so particularly cut. Minimal signs of feeding, if any at all. Just like the body today in the Commission of Works. And Rimbaud.'

'Right. The face bitten off.'

Drusher nodded. 'Yes, except I don't think it was bitten. Remember how clean I said it was? I mean almost sterile. None of the bacterial traces one would expect from an animal bite. Especially not from an old, diseased predator with gums receding from vitamin deficiency. Macks, I could wiggle that poor cat's teeth out with my fingers.'

Her face had gone hard. 'Keep going, Valentin,' she said.

'The body in the stacks we went to look at. That was the work of the carnodon. It had mauled and eaten the corpse away. I checked the autopsy files. Nine of the cases were just like that. Gnawed. The victims were all either dead already or helpless. Old, infirm. The carnodon had escaped from the zoological gardens, but it was weak and long past its hunting prime. It roamed the city, not preying, but scavenging. That was all it could do anymore.'

'What are you telling me?' Macks asked quietly.

'Look at the map again. Here.' Drusher flipped a switch. 'Now I've taken away the bodies I can attribute to the cat. Cleans it up a bit, doesn't it?'

'Yes,' she admitted.

'The old carnodon was hungry and opportunistic. It had no pattern. It just roamed and fed where it could. What we're left with is a much more precise zone. Almost territorial. The killings here were like poor Rimbaud - swift, savage, clean. No feeding.'

'But it's still an odd crescent-shaped spread. How can we triangulate from that?'

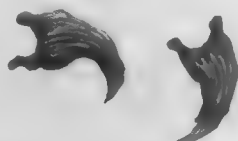
'Look at the map, Macks. Territory is determined not just by hunter but also by prey. The crescent-shaped dispersal covers an area east of the Commission of Works. There are none to the west because that's an area interdicted by the Martial Order Division. It doesn't kill there, Macks, because there's no one there to kill.'

'Oh Throne...' she murmured.

'And this is the good bit,' Drusher smiled. 'Look what happens when I mirror the dispersal, projecting it as if there was quarry in all directions. The crescent becomes...?'

'A circle.'

'Right, a circle. There's your focus. There's your bloody pattern. That's its territory. Right there.'



**M**ACKS WAS DRIVING faster than ever. In the back seat sat Edwin and a trooper called Roderin. Both were checking their riotgun loads.

'You're sure about this?' Macks hissed.

'I've very little left to stake on it,' Drusher replied, 'my professional credentials being long since used up.'

'Don't get smart,' she warned. 'You two ready?' she called over her shoulder.

Edwin and Roderin both replied in the affirmative. Edwin leaned forward. 'I thought we'd got this thing, sir,' he said. 'I mean, I thought Falken had plugged it.'

'He got the cat,' Drusher said. 'But the cat wasn't it.'

Macks began to slow down, and it was lucky she did. A second magistratum transporter swung out in front of them from a side street and ploughed ahead.

'Falken,' Macks whispered.



THEY PULLED UP outside the Commission of Works. Falken had two troopers with him, Levy and Mantagne.

'What the hells is this about?' Falken asked belligerently. He was still half-drunk from the party in the morgue.

'We're onto a lead,' Macks said. 'Behave.'

Falken looked at Drusher. 'I got it, stone dead. Boom-boom. What is this crap now?'

'Something else,' Drusher said.

They spread out in a line, entering the weed-choked waste behind the Commission of Works.

'Macks?' Drusher called. She came over to him.

'I'd like a weapon.'

'In the old days, you-'

'I'd really like a weapon,' he repeated.

Macks nodded, and lowered her riotgun in one hand as she pulled the hand gun from her holster. She handed it to him.

'The safety's by-'

'I know how they work,' he snapped.

They pushed on.

'So, this is all about territory, right?' she said.

Drusher nodded. 'You saw the map. We're entering its territory now. Its hunting ground.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'Like I said, you saw the map. The thing is, we're not talking about animal instinct. Not territory as a predator would understand it. We're talking about orders.'

'What? Orders?'

'What is this place, Macks?'

'The Commission of Works.'

'And what's behind it?'

'Just rubble, Valentin.'

'Yeah, but what was it before it was rubble?'

'It was the main building of the Administratum here in Tycho. Before the tank shells levelled it.'

'Exactly. The Administratum centre. Dead centre of the spread pattern. During the civil war, something was ordered to guard that vital point, secure it, defend it.'

Macks glared at him. 'A man?'

Drusher shrugged. 'Something. Something that's still doing it. Macks, I glimpsed the killer in the Commission of Works, right after it killed Rimbaud. It was humanoid.'

Spread wide, the line of officers entered the ruins of the Administratum. Some parts of the ruin were two or three storeys tall, held up, crippled and crooked, by the ferrosteel bars stripped through the rockcrete.

There were weeds everywhere, flourishing. Tinsel-barb and frondwort, cabbage speculus and the limp foliage of climbing traced. The air was pungent with root-rot, stagnant water, mould.

Drusher slowly circled round. Macks was nearby, riotgun raised. He glanced left and saw Falken bending in under a broken doorway. To his right, Edwin was aiming his weapon at the overhung, plant-swathed walls.

Levy raised his clucking auspex box. 'Getting something, very weak. It's coming from the west.'

Falken nodded and disappeared. Macks hurried onwards. Mantagne covered her, glancing nervously up at the blooming foliage. Weapon clenched high, Roderin shuffled round through a ruined archway.

'Getting hot now, getting really hot,' Levy called, lifting up his auspex, which was burring like a cicada.

'Throne, it must be right on us!'

Falken's gun went off. Once. Twice. Then another one echoed it. Macks started forward, running, and Drusher followed. Levy was right behind them. Mantagne rushed around to the other side of the wall.

There was a scream. Two more shots. Three.

Mantagne was dead. He had been sliced open from the scalp to the sternum. Blood was still spitting from his opened body, high into the air.

'Throne!' Macks cried, turning round. She heard Falken fire again, then Edwin. 'Where is it? Where is it?'

Levy almost crashed into her from behind, following his auspex blindly. 'Right there! There!'

Macks aimed and fired, once, twice, grinding back the slide each time. She put a huge hole in the facing wall.

Shots again, distant, from Falken and Edwin. Macks and Levy followed the sound. Pistol raised, Drusher turned the other way.

This predator was smart. Very smart and very able. It knew all about misdirection. It could outthink any regular human and then split him open. It understood military tactics because that is what it dealt in. It had been programmed. It had been given orders.

Breathing hard, Drusher edged round another shattered arch, his weapon braced. His pulse was racing, but this felt entirely odd. This wasn't about his trained skills anymore. This wasn't about an animal, whose habits and behaviours he had been schooled to understand. This was the opposite.

So he did the opposite. Facing any hungry predator, the last thing a magos biologicis would want to do is step into the open. But he did so, turning a full circle, his pistol aimed in both hands.

On the rubble floor before him, he saw Roderin. Roderin was dead, just like the others.

Drusher circled again, weapon tight.

The killer flew at him.

Drusher pulled the trigger and kept it pulled. Eight, nine, ten rounds, the full clip boomed out of Macks's borrowed sidearm and hit the killer head on.

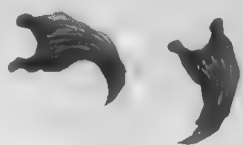
It fell, burst open, broken, puffed pink intestines spilling from its punctured torso. A man, but not a man. A product of the civil war. Augmetically strengthened, augmetically wired, its eyes a black visor, wires stapled into its flesh, its palsied hands curled over to expose the whirring chain blades sewn into its wrists.

The chain blades whined as they came together. Despite the rounds he had put into it, it got back up. And leapt at Drusher's face.

His gun clicked, dry.

'Down, Valentin!'

From behind him, Macks fired her riotgun and the killer's head burst like a tomato. The impact knocked it sideways. When it landed, its chain blades were still whirring involuntarily.



'ALL RIGHT?' she asked Drusher. He nodded.

'You were right. As ever.'

'Glad to be of service.'

'Seriously,' she said, leading him out of the ruins as Falken and Edwin fired shot after shot into the killer to make sure it was dead. 'Seriously, Drusher, I owe you.'

'A week's pay, you said. I do what I do.'

He began to walk away, picking his path through the rubble.

'Valentin, I could put it down as two weeks, no one would know.'

He shrugged. He looked back at her. 'What about a ticket off this rock?' he said, with a thin, sad smile.

'Can't afford that,' she said. 'Sorry. Budgets and all.'

'I had to ask,' said Drusher. He sat down on a chunk of bricks.

'Look,' said Macks. 'You've seen how stretched things are down here. The Martial Order Division can barely keep up. We can use all the help we can get, particularly sharp, educated minds with a thing for details. What do you think?'

'How would that work?' Drusher asked.

Macks shrugged. 'Not sure. I could probably second your services on a temporary basis using the emergency powers. It's not much, I know, but...'

Drusher frowned. 'My teaching post isn't much, but at least it's safe.' He handed her back the pistol.

'You sure?' she asked.

'Whenever I spend any time with you, Macks, it ends up getting exciting,' he said. 'Rather too exciting for a man of my disposition.'

'Hey,' she replied, as if hurt, 'I haven't got you killed so far.'

Drusher smiled. 'So far.'

Macks nodded. 'All right,' she said. She kissed him briefly on the cheek and turned to walk back to the transporters.

Every wrong turn destiny had ever offered him...

And which was this? Drusher sighed.

'Macks?' he called out.

'Yes?'

'Would I get my own desk?'

Turning back, she smirked. 'Valentin, you'll even get your own couch.'

Drusher got to his feet, and wandered down the path after her. ▸

A black and white illustration of a muscular man in a forest. He is covered in blood and scratches, holding a long knife. The scene is dark and atmospheric, with tall trees and dense foliage in the background.

A BRUNNER THE BOUNTY HUNTER STORY

# SICKHOUSE

CL WERNER

THE ATMOSPHERE in the dingy little cellar room was, if anything, even more stifling than the sweltering Miragliano streets overhead. Strings of wet linen had been set between the thick wooden posts that supported the tannery above the cellar, yet far from cooling the dank chamber they had served only to increase the humidity. Coupled with the rich stink of rotten vegetables and the other refuse that lay heaped in piles all around the chamber, the effect was not unlike entering one of the blighted swamps that crouched beyond the city walls. Certainly the cellar's lone denizen should not have looked out of place in such an environment.

The feeble creature that sprawled upon the rickety cot rolled onto his side, stretching a thin, wasted limb toward the small oil lamp that rested on the floor beside him. Thick, wormy digits that were more tentacle than finger raised the flame, increasing the illumination within the miserable rat-hole. The mutant scowled as his visitor sank into the chair facing him without invitation. The creature muttered under his breath. Manners were often lacking in those who still deigned to visit Tessari the information broker.

'What you want to know will cost you two pieces of silver,' the mutant croaked. The man sitting in the chair smiled thinly at the crippled monster.

'And how do you know that, Snake-Fingers?' the visitor's harsh voice sneered. 'I haven't said anything yet.' There was a note of suspicion and challenge to the man's voice, an unspoken threat behind his words. Tessari leaned back, his eyes narrowing.

'There is no mystery to my price, bounty killer,' Tessari replied, putting as much distaste in the title as his visitor had in describing the mutant's affliction. 'I need two pieces of silver to secure a new supply of blankets before winter sets in. Therefore, whatever it is you wish to know, the price is two pieces of silver.'

For a moment, the bounty hunter was silent, as though pondering Tessari's price. At length, he nodded his head in agreement. 'Very well, cellar-rat, I am looking for the thief Riano. So far, I haven't been able to find him. Rats have ears, tell me what you have heard.'

'Have you tried searching the back rooms of the Maid of Albion?' Tessari inquired. 'Riano has done favours for the owner of that drinking hole in the past.'

'I've already looked there,' the bounty hunter snarled. 'Riano's nowhere in Miragliano.'

'How can you be certain?' Tessari pressed, his tones bubbling with interest. The wormy fingers of his hand twitched in a loathsomely boneless fashion.

'Because if he was in Miragliano, I'd have found him already,' the bounty hunter retorted, his temper rising. 'It seems clear to me that you do not know anything, Maggot-Hand.' The killer began to rise from the chair.

'Don't be hasty!' Tessari cried out, surging forward, reaching toward the bounty hunter. 'Sit, and talk with me.'

'I've better ways to spend my time than wasting it down in this rat's den of yours,' the bounty hunter snapped. 'If you can't help me, I'll find someone who can.'

'The man you are looking for has left Miragliano,' Tessari called out to the killer's back, frightened by the prospect of being left alone once more within the dank cellar. 'If so, then he has gone somewhere he can lie low until the price on his head diminishes. Someplace he will feel safe.'

The bounty hunter hesitated, turning slowly, one hand gripping the weapon hanging from his belt. 'And where would that be?' he demanded. Tessari held out the less deformed of his hands, waiting until his visitor walked back and placed a silver coin in his palm. The bounty killer held the other one poised between his thumb and forefinger.

'I'll give you this one if your information is useful,' he informed the mutant. Tessari shrank back into his bedding.

'Riano grew up in the small village of Decimas,' the mutant stated. 'If he has fled Miragliano, he can only have gone back to Decimas, where he has many friends. Friends who might make things rather hard for men of your profession.'

'I doubt it,' the bounty hunter told Tessari, tossing the other coin to the mutant. The bounty hunter turned away once more.

'Wait!' Tessari cried. 'There is more, something else that would be of interest to a man like you.' The visitor turned back, glaring down at the deformed man.

'I grow tired of these games, lice-breeder,' the warrior hissed. 'What else do you have to say?'



Tessari's twisted face spread into an avaricious smile. 'It will cost you another silver piece.' The bounty hunter drew another coin from a pouch fixed to his belt, holding it once more between his fingers.

'There is another man looking for Riano, a bounty killer like yourself.' Tessari leaned forward, voice dropping into a conspiratorial whisper. 'Would it interest you to know that two days ago another man was standing where you are now, asking me the same questions you've been asking?'

'Out with it, dung-eater! Who else is on Riano's trail?'

'Brunner,' Tessari told his visitor, enjoying the sudden unease that manifested upon the other man's features. The mutant grimaced as the bounty hunter returned the silver coin to its pouch. 'That was mine!' Tessari growled.

'And how much did Brunner pay for his information?' his guest demanded. Tessari glared at the other man, wormy fingers coiling like angry pythons. The bounty hunter smiled back. 'Since he has a head start on me, I'd be a fool to pay more than he did.' The man withdrew through the gloom of the cellar. Behind him, the twisted Tessari hurled obscenities at his back.



THE SUN HUNG high in the sky, glaring down from the azure plain, causing tiny ripples of heat to shimmer upwards from the scraggly brown grass below. The barren dirt and rock of the narrow road that crawled between the underbrush and the sickly autumnal trees had been baked to the solidity of granite, for in this season there would be no kindly rains to counterbalance the sun's tyrannical attentions. No birds flew upon the hot breeze, hiding within whatever shade they could find. The only sign of life was a large grey lizard, its long-taloned fingers clutching the sides of a large stone resting upon the road. The reptile's eyes were closed, its body bobbing up and down in repetitious motion as its cold flesh soaked up the blazing rays. Suddenly, the lizard's scaly lids snapped open and it cocked its head, listening to the vibrations that had disturbed it. With almost blinding speed, the reptile lunged from its

perch, streaking across the road to skitter into the sanctuary afforded by a patch of yellowing brambles.

The rider whose approach had disturbed the creature paid its departure little notice, his steely eyes dismissing the lizard as soon as they had reacted to the sudden motion, then returning to their study of the road itself. Behind the rider, a ragged grey packhorse plodded, its back laden down with numerous packs and bags, and several things that were clearly sheathed weapons. The rider's mount, a massive bay warhorse, turned its head, seeming to glance sympathetically at its doughty companion. The rider gave a gentle tug on the reins, recalling his steed to its course. The sooner he found what he was looking for, the sooner all of them would be able to find rest.

The rider was a tall man, panther-like in his build. His features were solid, harsh and weathered, cold blue eyes squinting from the leathery face beneath his close-cropped brown hair. A suit of brigandine armour hung about his frame, a breastplate of dark metal encasing his chest. Weapons dripped from the belts that crossed his torso and circled his waist – the steel fangs of knives, the gaping maw of a pistol, the cruel edge of a hatchet. Upon one hip rested a huge knife with jagged teeth, a savage instrument which its owner had named 'the Headsman' in a moment of sadistic humour. From the other, its golden hilt fashioned in the shape of a dragon with outspread wings, was sheathed the warrior's longsword, the fabled blade named Drakesmalice. From the horn of his saddle, swinging from the leather straps that bound it in place, the rounded steel frame of the bounty hunter's sallet helm cooked beneath the sun's merciless attentions.

Brunner lifted his eyes from the road, glancing at the sign that stood beside the deserted path, its three fingers pointing in every direction save that dominated by the woods at its back. The killer smiled grimly as he noted the topmost sign. Scrawled upon it in charcoal letters was the word 'Decimas'. Brunner shook his head, looking away from the sign. As he did so, he noticed a sorry figure sprawled beneath the sign, almost hidden by the rock pile that formed the signpost's support. Brunner eyed the shape warily, watching for any sign of movement or breath. Without removing his eyes from the prone form, the bounty hunter drew his pistol and carefully dropped down from

Fiend's saddle. With cautious glances to either side of the path, the bounty hunter slowly walked toward the shape.

It was a man, dressed in the tattered homespun common to the peasants that populated the Tilean countryside. Brunner nudged the man's side with his steel-toed cavalry boot, watching the body for any sign of reaction. It simply rocked in its position. Putting more effort behind his thrust, Brunner pitched the body onto its back. The bounty hunter stepped away from the sight that greeted him, a gloved hand reaching to his face to keep the smell from his nose.

The man was dead, but neither beast nor man had claimed him. The swollen tongue that protruded from the corpse's contorted face had nearly been bitten clean through during the agonies that had gripped the man. Upon his skin were livid red boils, some nearly the size of Brunner's thumb, each weeping a filmy, scarlet pus. The bounty hunter continued to back away. He had seen too many bodies like this recently. The Red Pox had returned to Tilea, rampaging across the countryside, striking down all who tempted its pestilent attentions.

Brunner turned away from the corpse, eyes considering the bleak expanse toward the south. His destination lay in that direction, but if the sorry corpse at his feet had come from there, if the Red Pox was rampant in the south, then likely he would be making a wasted journey. The dead did not last long when the Red Pox was abroad, so long as there were still healthy men to burn the diseased corpses. It would be difficult to turn in a pile of ash and blackened bones if Riano had already been claimed by the plague.

The sound of a twig snapping spun the bounty hunter around, lifting him from his thoughts. Brunner cursed under his breath. Worrying that the Red Pox had made him careless, sloppy. His natural caution had been subordinated to concern about the plague that hovered about the land. The bounty hunter chastised himself. He'd been around long enough to know that a moment of distraction could often last for all eternity.

The creature that had caused the sound rose from where it had been crawling, realising that its stealth had been compromised. It was a miserable, twisted shape, a rotten mockery of the human form. Ragged linen hung about its lean, wasted frame, tied about its waist with a length of

rope. Its pallid skin was blotched with ugly red welts and crater-like scars, its face a broken shambles, crazed eyes swollen within their sockets, nose rotten away into a scabrous stump of cartilage. Upon its forehead, the miserable creature had carved a brand, three bloated circles, linked at their centres, each sporting a jagged arrow. The brand was the only vivid thing about the creature's face, weeping a vibrant green pus each time the thing drew a breath. But it was the object clutched in the creature's withered hand that arrested Brunner's attention – a fat-bladed shortsword.

The bounty hunter did not give the twisted abomination a chance to close upon him. With a single deft motion, he ripped his pistol from the holster resting across his belly and fired into the diseased abomination's rotten skull. Watery brain tissue erupted from the back of the creature's head as the bullet tore its way through. The plague-ridden thing did not cry out as its head exploded, but simply crumpled into the road with all the grace of a wilting flower.

The shot's echoes had yet to fade before the bounty hunter discovered that the diseased attacker had not been alone. Other twisted shapes scrambled into view, descending upon the road like a pack of jackals upon a fresh carcass. Some were similar to the one Brunner had put down, ragged, tattered figures that might have been men before their flesh was consumed by the unholy foulness which now claimed them. Several though had never borne the mantle of humanity, their feet ending in cloven hooves, their shapes clothed in mangy fur, their heads cast in the manner of goats and kine. Upon these monstrosities, too, was that pestilent brand, filthy pus drooling from the mark and caking the fur of the beastmen with reeking filth.

Brunner tore his sword from its sheath, cursing anew as the diseased abominations sprung their ambush. There were at least a dozen of them, far too many to face with sword and axe. As the bounty hunter considered this fact, his cold eyes stared longingly at the repeating crossbow lashed to the saddle of his warhorse. He was a master with the weapon, and with it in his hands four of his attackers would have found death. But already there were beasts and once-men between him and his animals, converging on the horses in a frenzied mob. Brunner watched as Fiend reared back, the massive

warhorse's iron-shod hooves lashing out and splitting the skull of a degenerate plague-mutant as though it were an egg shell. Whether intent on plunder or horseflesh, the mutants would not claim the horses without a fight.

The bounty hunter braced himself to meet his own attackers. Three of the mutants and a pair of goat-headed pestigors had split from the main pack, their lust for slaughter and bloodshed overwhelming their desire for plunder and meat. The creatures glared at Brunner with rheumy eyes, strings of spittle dripping from slackened mouths. Brunner was not deceived by the apparent simple-mindedness of his attackers, he had seen goblins beneath the haunted caverns of the Vaults given over to similar fits. And though their attacks might have been crude and lacking in co-ordination, their befuddled brains had seemed incapable of understanding pain, even as limbs were hacked from their bodies.

The first of the attackers charged with a wet, gurgling war cry, his mutated face resembling nothing so much as a grinning skull. Brunner prepared to meet the monster's assault, ready to cut the rotten head from its decaying body. But the killing stroke proved unnecessary. With a loud crunch, a five-inch spike of steel smashed into the mutant's face, spilling it to the ground and tripping up the lice-ridden pestigor that followed behind it. The bounty hunter did not waste time considering his good fortune. Even as the mutant dropped he was in motion, his sword lashing out to meet the axe of the mutant closing upon his right. The keen edge of Drakesmalice smashed into the rotten wooden haft of the axe, just beneath its rust-pitted head, shearing through the weapon and severing the reed-thin arm behind it.

The mutant recoiled from the stroke, its stump dripping a filth that was far too dark to be proper blood. The creature seemed to regard the mutilating wound as little more than an inconvenience, reaching down with its remaining arm to retrieve the blade of its axe. The bounty hunter's gut churned at the unnatural sight, stabbing downward between the mutant's shoulders as it bent down. Spitted on the tip of the longsword, the mutant's body trembled for a moment, then grew slack. Brunner tore the weapon free from the corroded body, spinning about to meet his next attacker.

It was the hulking beastman that had fallen over the mutant felled by the mysterious steel spike. The other beastman was down, another of the strange steel spikes sprouting from its heart. It was just as well, Brunner considered as he sized up his adversary. One such foe was more than sufficient.

The pestigor gnashed its fanged jaws, its clawed hands tightening about the grip of its spike-headed mace. The monster's eyes were weeping a filthy yellow ooze, gnats and flies buzzing about its goat-like head. Upon its chest, livid where it had been burned into the mangy fur, the pestilent brand stood out. Brunner felt disgust welling up within him as he beheld the hideous rune, fighting down his revulsion just in time to push aside the monster's brutal attack. The pestigor reared back, snarling some obscenity in its own harsh tongue, then lashed out once more, the bounty hunter managing to turn aside the powerful blow only by putting the weight of his entire body behind his own blade's retort.

From the corner of his eye, Brunner could see the other mutant working his way toward the bounty hunter's back, a short boar-spear gripped in its malformed hands. Unable to free himself from his duel with the pestigor, Brunner knew there was little he could do to protect himself from a stab in the back. The bounty hunter tried to manoeuvre his massive foe around, to place the pestigor between himself and the spear-bearing mutant. But the beastman would have none of it, accepting a slash to its forearm in return for holding its ground. It too had seen the mutant moving toward Brunner's back and was not about to surrender such an advantage.

The sound of steel crunching through bone rumbled through Brunner's ears, followed by the impact of a body falling somewhere behind him. The pestigor's goat-like face contorted into a mask of feral rage and the bounty hunter could guess the source of its fury – the spear-bearing mutant had just been shot down. Brunner did not give the pestigor time to turn its rage into strength. Slipping past the monster's guard, he slashed his sword along its gut, spilling its entrails into the dust. The beastman stumbled backward, the mace falling from its claws as it reached down for the ropy mess hanging from its belly. Brunner slashed at the monster again, this time nearly severing its forearm. The pestigor lifted its horned head, roaring its rage into the barren sky, bloody froth

spilling from its jaws. As Brunner moved in for the kill, the pestigor lowered its head, spitting a stream of filth into his face.

It was the bounty hunter's turn to stumble back from his foe, one gloved hand wiping away at the gory muck that now covered his features, finding with disgust that the pestigor's bloody spittle was alive with writhing, wormy shapes. Brunner cleared his eyes just in time to see the pestigor bearing down on him, its remaining claw crunching down about his shoulder, its powerful grip seeking to pull the bounty hunter into the massive horns that curled against the monster's skull. Brunner stabbed into the beastman's side with his blade, punching the length of his sword into the monster's corrupt flesh, transfixing its blackened heart. The pestigor fell to its knees, its eyes glaring into Brunner's own as its unclean life slowly drained from its twisted form. The grip on his shoulder loosened and Brunner watched dispassionately as the pestigor fell backwards and crashed into the dust.

The bounty hunter looked away from his fallen foes, looking back toward his animals. Three mutants lie sprawled about them, and two others looked to have fallen victim to the mysterious sharpshooter who had so fortuitously come to his aid. The others were fleeing back down the road, forsaking the promise of loot and provisions in their haste to save their own hides. Brunner strode toward his horses, keen to inspect the animals for any sign of injury and to recover his crossbow from Fiend's saddle, lest the twisted ambushers regain their courage. As he approached, Fiend and the packhorse, Paychest, retreated from him and it was only with slow steps and soothing words that he was able to keep the horses from bolting. Patting Fiend's neck with a gloved hand, Brunner quickly removed his crossbow from its holster, slapping the box-like magazine into place. He turned his head in the direction from which he judged the mysterious steel shafts to have originated. He was not surprised to find a lone rider descending the jagged slope of a low hill. Leaning against the side of his horse, keeping his crossbow at the ready, Brunner awaited the approach of his unknown benefactor.

His wait was not a long one, and soon Brunner found himself confronted by a tall, slender man mounted on a white steed of similar build, a mount built for speed rather than war. The man himself was garbed in

black, from the leather boots that encased his feet to the leather hat on his head. A leather belt crossed the man's chest, long steel spikes fitted into the loops that rose along its surface. A number of box-like pouches were fitted to the belt that circled the warrior's waist, along with a longsword and poinard, both of the simple, utilitarian style favoured by Tilea's professional duellists. Resting upon the saddle before the rider was a strange device, a thing of steel and bronze that looked as though it could not decide if it were musket or crossbow.

Brunner looked up into the face hiding within the shadow of the rider's hat. It was a gaunt, hungry face, cruel eyes that gleamed with an almost feral cunning. The man's sharp nose stabbed downward above a thin, almost lipless mouth and a slender black moustache. It was the kind of face Brunner knew only too well. The face of a predator. The face of a man like himself.

'I hope you don't mind the intrusion,' the rider said when he brought his horse to a stop a few yards from Brunner. 'But it looked like you had bitten off more than you could handle.' The weasel-eyed man chuckled with grim humour. 'Even the infamous Brunner isn't the equal of a dozen beastmen.'

'Perhaps they didn't know who I was,' Brunner returned. 'Or they would have brought twice as many.' The jest brought another sardonic chuckle from the rider. Brunner fixed the other man with his cold stare, the leather of his gloves creaking as he firmed his hold on the crossbow. 'Tell me, Sabarra, how is it that you happen to be in the right place at the right time? I've never been one to place much trust in providence.'

Sabarra grinned back at the other bounty hunter. 'If you are thinking I was expecting you, then you'd be right. There are things we should discuss, you and I.' The rider leaned back in his saddle, gesturing at the dead mutants strewn about the road. 'But it can wait until we put a little distance between ourselves and the road. Just in case their friends stop running and decide to come back this way.'



**T**HE TWO BOUNTY killers took the southern stretch of road, a move that took them away from the village of Decimas. Sabarra's eyes narrowed, studying his rival with undisguised interest and suspicion. For his part, Brunner seemed to be paying little attention to the Tilean, rubbing at his face with a cloth he'd dampened from his waterskin. Sabarra was not fooled by the display, he knew that the Reiklander was even now turning any number of schemes to rid himself of Sabarra over in his mind.

'You know of course that I'm after the same mark as you,' Sabarra declared. It was better to get the matter out in the open sooner rather than later. 'It's a handsome price Riano has on his head.' Brunner did not turn to regard Sabarra, instead dousing the cloth in his hand with more water from the skin. 'Enough for two men, if they aren't greedy,' Sabarra elaborated. Brunner turned cold eyes onto the weasel-faced killer.

'And what if the men in question are greedy?' he inquired. A cruel smile split Sabarra's features.

'Then things could get very upsetting,' Sabarra said. 'One of the men might get there before the other. That might not be so good if Riano has some friends with him.' The bounty hunter's gloved hand whipped upward, catching a buzzing fly between its fingers. 'And, of course, he'd also have to worry about his back,' Sabarra warned, crushing the fly in his fist. 'Because even if he won out, he'd still have something the other man wanted.'

'And what if the men decided they weren't greedy?' Brunner asked, lowering his hand. Sabarra's eyes narrowed with concern as he noticed how near to his pistol Brunner's hand was now poised.

'They might decide to share,' the Tilean suggested. 'Split everything down the middle. The dangers and the gold, divided up equally between them. Rather a good idea with the countryside crawling with beastmen and half-mad with plague.'

Brunner nodded thoughtfully, then lifted the cloth back to his face. 'Of course, they would be foolish to stop watching their backs,' he warned. 'Sabarra didn't bother hiding the cunning look in his eyes. 'But let's say these men did reach an agreement, where would they start?'

'By sharing information,' Sabarra told him. 'For instance, why are we riding away from Decimas rather than toward it.'

'Because, as we both know, Riano isn't there,' Brunner said. 'Decimas is gone, the Red Pox has already done its work there.'

'Then why south?' pressed Sabarra. Brunner continued to rub at his face.

'You should spend more time learning about your prey,' Brunner said. 'Don't place all your wager on a single informant. I have my reasons to believe Riano headed south if he had to quit Decimas.'

'And those would be?' Sabarra asked.

'I prefer to keep that information to myself,' Brunner replied. 'That way I won't have to watch my back.' The Reiklander continued to dab at the blistered skin of his face, trying to soothe the raw, irritating itch that had seeped into his skin. Sabarra's smile widened as he noted the ugly rash.

'I'd be worried about that,' he told Brunner. 'Who knows what foulness was in that animal's blood. I'd get myself to the nearest hospice of Shallya if I were you. Let the priestesses bleed the contamination out of you. Maybe let someone else finish this hunt for you, bring you your percentage later.'

Brunner threw the cloth down. 'Either I die or I don't,' he told Sabarra. 'I'll not go crawling to anybody, not even the gods. I'm through with all of that, through playing their games.'

'Have a care,' Sabarra warned his rival. 'You die and I might never find Riano. I'd hate to miss that payday because an impious fool went and caught the plague.'

Brunner's response was spoken in a tone as menacing as the grave. 'Then I suggest you start praying I don't get sick.'



**T**HE DISEASE-RIDDEN mutant crept into the foul-smelling hovel, bent almost in half, cringing at every step as though it were a whipped cur rather than a man. The room he had entered was a shambles: furniture overturned, walls fouled with blood and mucus, the air filled with buzzing flies. Bodies littered the floor, their skin blackening as necrotic bacteria speedily consumed their diseased flesh, the final trademark of the ghastly Red Pox. But it was not this reminder of the hideous disease that so unnerved the once-human wretch. It was



the five armoured shapes looming against the far wall.

The warriors were huge, hulking monsters, their powerful forms encased within suits of plate armour, the steel pitted with corruption. Upon their breastplates had been stamped the mark of their deity, the daemon god to whom each of the corrupt warriors had pledged his life and soul. Three circles and three arrows – the mark of Nurgle, Grandfather of pestilence and decay. The close-faced helms of the Chaos warriors did not turn to regard the mutant as he slowly crept toward them, intent instead on the miserable figure sprawled upon the filthy floor before them. It was an old man, his body disfigured by the profusion of red boils that peppered his skin. His diseased frame trembled and shook as the agonies of the plague ripped at him, yet the Chaos warriors made no motion to end his suffering. Plague was the handiwork of their god, and to the Chaos warriors, what they were witnessing was a holy sacrament, and they stood as if in the presence of their loathsome deity.

Nervously, the mutant cleared its throat, allowing a dry croak to escape its drawn, placid lips. The sound caused the warriors to turn their steel faces upon him, fixing him with their burning eyes. The mutant fought back the urge to flee, holding his ground as the centremost of the armoured warriors strode toward him. He was a brute, his steel armour fading into a mass of green corruption, leather straps hanging from spikes set into his shoulder-guards displaying a variety of festering trophies. The warrior's helm was cast in the shape of some mammoth insect and there was no sign of any eyes behind the sieve-like holes that pitted the helm's face. The mark of pestilence branded into the warrior's breastplate glowed with a leprous light, marking the creature as favoured by his daemon master – a champion of Chaos.

'Zhere izz reazon why you dizurb uzz,' the droning, buzzing voice of the champion echoed from within his helm. The mutant cowered before the unnatural voice, falling to its knees before the ghastly creature. Pulstlitz gave the mutant only a moment to answer before growing impatient, his armoured hand falling to the massive sword at his side, a gigantic blade of rusted steel that drooled a murky scum from its pitted edge, the filth falling to the floor in sizzling droplets.

'Mercy dread master!' the mutant cried in a voice that seemed to bubble from the bottom of his stomach. 'Your slave did not mean to disturb your devotions! I came to bring word that Folgore is not coming back.'

A seething growl rasped behind the insect-helm. Pulstlitz took another menacing step toward the mutant. 'That vermin darezz defy my command! I will carve the name of Pulzlizz upon hizz bonezz for zhizz betrayal of Nurgle!' The other Chaos warriors watched their master warily, knowing too well that when their champion was in such a state, death hovered near. The mutant buried his face into the floor, unwilling to gaze upon the favoured of the Plague God.

'Folgore is dead, master!' the mutant whined. 'Slain upon the road by a traveller who were not the blessings of the Grandfather!'

'You rizzked attack when I commanded you here?' Pulstlitz demanded, the droning buzz of his voice seeming to come not from one but a dozen throats. 'When I need every mangy beazman and acolyte? When I prepare to raze the hozpizz of thrice-accursed Zhallya? It izz at zuch time you zee fit to dizobey?' The enraged plague champion lifted his armoured foot, bringing it smashing downward into the abased mutant. Bones cracked as Pulstlitz brought his weight down upon the mutant's neck, then ground the creature's skull into the floor beneath his foot. When nothing solid remained beneath his boot, Pulstlitz turned to his warriors.

'We wait no longer!' the Chaos champion droned. 'Zhiz night we ride for the hozpizz! I will see it burn!' The warriors did not pause to question their leader's command, but hastened to follow the monster into the night, leaving the old man to complete his communion with the Plague God in solitude and silence.



*J* ABARRA WATCHED as the white walls of the structure finally manifested in the distance. The bounty hunter cursed under his breath. It was about time he encountered some manner of luck. Since setting out after the price on Riano's head, he'd been met by obstacle after obstacle. It was as if the gods themselves were hurling every misfortune

that could conceive in Sabarra's way, as though he were some mighty hero from some Luccini fable rather than a hired killer just trying to maintain a comfortably hedonistic lifestyle. The bounty hunter spat into the dust of the road. The gods! As though they were paying any manner of attention to him. They certainly were not in the mood for answering prayers.

The bounty hunter looked over his shoulder, back at the train of animals that slowly plodded along behind him. Slumped in the saddle of the rearmost horse was Sabarra's old rival and recent partner, Brunner. The Tilean cursed again. He'd warned Brunner against mocking the gods, but the miserable Reiklander had remained unrepentant. Now he was sick, contaminated by whatever filth had lived within the loathsome blood of the pestigor he'd killed. For three days now, Brunner had been slipping in an out of consciousness as the disease wracked his body.

Sabarra shook his head, cursing his ill luck. During his lucid moments, which were becoming less and less frequent, Brunner's mind had wandered, crawling through the muck of the bounty hunter's bloody career. But he'd still retained enough coherency that he did not respond to Sabarra's promptings for more information – most especially with regards to Riano and whatever hole the thief had relocated himself to. Some deep-rooted instinct of self-preservation stilled Brunner's lips at such times. The bounty hunter's eyes had cleared for a moment, boring into Sabarra's own. 'Get me to a healer,' Brunner's voice had rasped. 'Then I'll tell you what you want to hear.'

By rights he should have left Brunner behind. Sabarra had seen enough of the Red Pox in his time to recognise its early stages. But the image of the gold being offered for Riano's head had been too tempting. So, Sabarra had lifted the sickly warrior into the saddle of his horse, tying Brunner's hands about the animal's neck, his legs beneath its belly. With Brunner secured to his animal, Sabarra had set out for the only place he could think of where a man suffering from the Red Pox might find sanctuary and succour. He only hoped that Brunner would last long enough to reach it.

The white walls grew steadily in size, the narrow cross-shaped windows and massive supporting buttresses breaking up the smooth alabaster façade. Sabarra could make

out ragged figures huddled in the shadow of the walls, a great sprawl of wretched humanity. The bounty hunter's spirits fell another notch. Just how widespread was this plague? It looked like half of Tilea was camped outside the walls. He risked another look over his shoulder, striving to see if Brunner had reacted at all to the sight, but the man remained as he had for more hours than Sabarra wanted to count. The Tilean looked back toward the walls, noticing this time the vast pit that had been torn from the earth some distance to the west of the structure. Dour, hooded figures were busy there, throwing naked bodies into the yawning chasm as though tossing seed across a field. It was a minute before Sabarra released the breath he hadn't realised he had been holding. Of all the ends he could imagine, being consigned to a plague pit was probably about as bad as it got. Sabarra looked back once more at his charge and scowled.

So long as he found out what he wanted to know, Sabarra didn't much care where Brunner wound up. All the Reiklander had to do was cling on to life long enough to become lucid one last time.



**A**N AURA OF misery so intense that it seemed to clutch at Sabarra's face greeted the bounty hunter as he drew nearer the white-walled structure. The Tilean struggled to avoid looking down, tried not to see the dejected, forlorn creatures that sprawled upon the ground all around them. Many looked dead already, only the glazed eyes that rolled within their boil-strewn faces betraying the fact that they yet drew breath. Some of these miserable creatures had managed to build crude tents of rag and fur, but the vast majority just lay upon the ground, exposed to the open air and the chill of night. Sabarra tried not to imagine how many of these lost souls would make the journey past the portal of Morr before the sun again rose. Perhaps it was even a kindness to allow them to expire from exposure rather than the suffering the Red Pox would wrench from their bodies before it was through with them.

Sabarra slowly moved the horses through the sprawl of diseased refugees, the animals hard-pressed to avoid stomping on the miserable wretches. The bounty hunter allowed a slight sigh of relief to escape his throat as he saw the arched doorway that led into the structure behind the white walls and the shimmering marble dove that loomed above the arch's cornerstone. 'Well, friend,' Sabarra declared, glancing back once more at the still unmoving Brunner, 'this is it. The Shrine of the Seven Mercies. The hospice of Shallya.'

As if in response to his declaration, several men suddenly appeared beneath the arch, emerging from the interior of the hospice. Three of the men wore suits of armour, narrow helmets crushed about their ears. Their eyes were red-rimmed and their faces bore a pained, tired expression. But there was nothing fatigued in the way in which they held their spears. Three other men, dressed in the simple sack-cloth of supplicants of Shallya, laboured under the weight of a scrawny, pale burden. Behind the men carrying the corpse, a pair of white-garbed priestesses followed, one bearing a torch, the other carrying a bundle of rags that Sabarra imagined had once clothed the dead man. It was a common custom in cases of the plague. The body was hastily buried, but the clothes and bedding were burned, lest they pass the contagion on to another.

The priestess bearing the torch stared up at the mounted bounty hunter, her eyes red-rimmed and brimming with fatigue. Sabarra was somewhat surprised to find that the priestess was quite comely beneath the lines of worry and overwork. It had always been his experience that the ranks of the priestesses were commonly filled by daughters deemed unfit for a profitable marriage by their fathers. The bounty hunter's face twisted in the faintest hint of a lewd smile. Instantly the woman's eyes narrowed with disapproval, the shadows cast by her hooded robe seeming to grow thicker about her face.

'What do you want here, mercenary?' the priestess asked, her voice soft, yet demanding. Sabarra noted that it was a voice used to the burden of command and guessed that the priestess must be highly ranked among the sisters of the hospice, perhaps even the Sister Superior in charge of the entire shrine. Taking that into consideration,

and remembering why he had come, the smile died on the bounty hunter's face. He was all business now.

'I seek the solace of the shrine,' Sabarra answered. 'I am in need of Shallya's mercy and blessing.'

The priestess took a step forward, the torch banishing the shadows from her face. 'You are ill?' she asked. Sabarra shook his head.

'No,' he replied, then gestured to the horses standing behind his own. 'But my friend is in dire need of healing.' Sabarra's voice dropped into a chill whisper. 'I fear it is the Red Pox.'

The priestess nodded her hooded head, sighing regretfully. 'Your friend is not alone. Many have fallen victim to the pox, and many more must follow before this evil has run its course. The mercies of Shallya are in much demand these days, our hospice is filled far beyond its capacity and still we cannot provide sanctuary for all who would enter.' She extended her arms to indicate the wretched masses clustered about the walls. 'The Red Pox is swift, once it has a hold on the flesh it is difficult to exorcise. We cannot forsake those in whom the infection is little, those who might recover, to give false hope to those for whom it is already too late.'

Sabarra gritted his teeth. When he first saw the miserable camp on the hospice's doorstep he should have expected as much. He stabbed a finger at the body being carried away. 'It seems there is at least one bed without an owner.' The priestess shook her head.

'And there are twenty already waiting to fill it,' she said sadly, turning to follow the grim procession.

'Dammit! At least you could look at him!' Sabarra snarled. The priestess turned again, her eyes boring into the bounty hunter's. At length she sighed and strode toward the warhorse standing behind Sabarra's own. The woman's steps slowed as she neared Fiend, as her eyes fell on the man lashed to the animal's back. It was a trembling hand that reached out toward the sick man, that lifted his head and stared at his face. The priestess recoiled as though it were a serpent she held in her hand.

'There is no room,' she repeated, her voice quivering. The man lashed to the saddle tilted his head and spoke in a shallow whisper.

'Even the goddess of mercy picks and chooses her prey,' Brunner's fading voice managed to hiss before his head sagged back down into Fiend's mane. The priestess glared at the sick man, then turned her head back toward Sabarra.

'Bring him inside,' Elisia told Sabarra. 'Sister Marcia will show you where.' Elisia did not wait for a response from the bounty hunter, but hurried after the funeral party, her steps hurried, fed by the doubt and fear that had closed icy fingers about her heart.

She had hoped never to see that face again, hoped never to hear that harsh, unforgiving voice. It had been almost a year since she had undertaken her mission of mercy for the Bertolucci family, wealthy merchants from Miragliano who had fled to a country villa in order to escape enemies in the city. But those enemies had sent an agent in pursuit of them, a hired killer to root them out from their hiding place. Brunner had 'chanced' upon Elisia as she was making her way to the villa, circumstance causing the grim bounty hunter to become her protector against the beastmen that prowled the countryside. Little did the priestess know that both of them had business at the villa – she to bring a new life into the world, the bounty hunter to remove an old one from it. Guilt and despair had wracked her for months afterward, that she had allowed herself to be the unwitting accomplice of the killer, that her actions had helped bring about a good man's death.

How she had wished death upon Brunner. It was true that he had saved her on the road to the villa, but only so that he could use her. She owed the merciless killer nothing. And now, her wish was coming true, Brunner was in the grip of the Red Pox, its poison coursing through his body. He would die, slowly and in great agony. Why then had she admitted him into the hospice?

Because it was her sacred oath to combat the forces of pestilence, because Brunner had questioned her integrity, made her consider whether she would violate that sacred duty simply to indulge her own desire for vengeance. Far from a wish fulfilled, the bounty hunter's arrival might prove the most arduous test of her faith she had ever endured.

Elisia hesitated, casting a worried look over her shoulder at the white walls of the hospice. Yes, it was a test, but was she equal to that test?



SABARRA STOOD ASIDE as a pair of burly supplicants lowered Brunner onto a straw pallet in one of the hospice's overcrowded wards. Designed to hold perhaps twenty inmates, every spare inch of space had been scavenged to provide room for nearly fifty. The men moved aside, allowing a dour priestess to inspect their latest charge. The old woman produced a small knife and began to strip away the bounty hunter's clothes and armour, her deft hands nimbly plucking weapons from Brunner's belt. The stricken bounty killer did not stir until the old woman's hand tugged at the dragon-hilt of Drakesmalice. Like a shot, Brunner's hand clutched at the weapon, fingers tightening about the blade until his knuckles turned white. The priestess tugged at the imprisoned weapon, trying to free it from the sick man's grasp.

'He doesn't want you to take his sword,' Sabarra stated. 'I suggest you leave it with him.' The old woman cast a sour look at the Tilean, but released her grip on Drakesmalice, hurrying to remove the rest of Brunner's armour. When she had finished, she gathered up the bounty hunter's gear and without a backward glance, strode from the ward. Sabarra waited until she had gone, then crouched beside Brunner's pallet. The reaction to the priestess trying to take his sword encouraged Sabarra that his rival might have slipped back into a moment of relative coherence.

'We're in the hospice, Brunner,' Sabarra told him. The stricken man turned his head weakly in Sabarra's direction. 'You're in the Seven Mercies.' Brunner's eyes snapped open as he heard the name. The bounty hunter stared at Sabarra for a moment, then cast his gaze across the rest of the ward. Even knocking on the gates to Morr's realm, he seemed to be studying the faces of the men around him, looking for any sign that might put a name to a face and a price to a name.

'You said if I brought you here, you would tell me where Riano has escaped to,' Sabarra reminded Brunner. Brunner's head rolled back to where he could again face the rival bounty killer. A slight smile pulled weakly at his mouth.

'I... I have... recon... reconsidered... the arrangement,' Brunner's words escaped him in a ragged whisper. Sabarra's features flushed crimson with anger and the killer's hand fell to the poniard sheathed at his hip. 'You... you should... start praying again,' Brunner advised the Tilean, seemingly oblivious to Sabarra's fury. 'Pray now that I... that I recover...'

Brunner's words trailed off into oblivion and his eyes closed. Sabarra watched the bounty hunter's body go lax, a part of him hoping that the disease had finished the Reiklander. But another part of him was relieved to note the steady rise and fall of his chest. While Brunner yet drew breath, there was still a chance that Sabarra could draw the information he wanted from the dying man.

The Tilean rose, casting a disgusted look at the wretched, moaning shapes strewn about the room. Sabarra drew the garlic pomander he wore beneath his tunic, lifting the herb to his nose, inhaling its septic fumes. Garlic was said to be proof against disease, but the bounty hunter had no great desire to test that belief any more than he had to. One way or another, he would be rid of Brunner soon. Turning on his heel, Sabarra marched from the ward, determined to find some cleaner air to breathe.



**N**EVER TAKE THE life of a human being. Elisia knelt before the simple altar that stood within the tiny chapel. There were three such chapels within the grounds of the Shrine, but this was the only one that still retained its intended purpose. The others had been transformed into makeshift infirmaries, as had the small courtyard and many of the cells inhabited by the priestesses themselves. They shared rooms now, sleeping in four-hour shifts.

Elisia lifted her eyes to the small marble statue that stood atop the altar – the image of a beautiful woman crafted in the classical Tilean style, a golden heart held in her hands,

as though offering the shimmering organ to the supplicant kneeling before the idol. It was symbolic of the selfless sacrifice of the Goddess of Mercy – offering of her own body that others might find solace and peace, the sick might be healed and the halt made whole. It was an example that the priestesses of her faith were expected to follow, a standard to aspire toward.

Never refuse healing to those in need. Such had been the oaths she had taken when she had cast aside the ruin of her old life and become a servant of Shallya. But never before had she felt their weight. Her oaths bit into her, like heavy chains that coiled about her body and strove to crush the breath from her.

The bounty hunter. Why had he come here, of all places? He was dying, Elisia had seen that much in the brief moment when her eyes had again regarded that cold, calculating face. The Red Pox had already gained a stronghold within his flesh. There was nothing she could do to save him.

Or was that simply what she wanted to believe? It would be so easy to simply step aside, let the disease run its course. That would be just retribution for how Brunner had used her, just vengeance for all the blood that stained the man's hands.

Never take the life of a human being. Elisia cringed as she muttered the oath under her breath. Would she be any better than Brunner if she allowed him to die? She had been wracked with guilt and anguish over being the unwitting accomplice to one man's death, how could she live with being the instrument of another man's? How could she continue to serve Shallya with blood on her own hands?

If the disease claimed Brunner, she would never be certain that she did not allow it. That doubt would always linger behind her eyes, within the pits of her soul.

Elisia rose, walking toward the altar. There was only one thing to be done. She circled the altar, lifting up one of the flagstones set behind it. From the hole beneath the stone she removed a bottle of dark Bretonnian glass. The holy waters of the Temple in Couronne, the blessed spring from which Shallya's tears dripped into the world of men. They were precious beyond the weight of gold, for within the Tears of Shallya were the divine healing powers of the goddess herself. The Seven Mercies had never had a large supply of the Tears, only enough to



guard the priestesses themselves against the diseases they hoped to cure, for what good would a healer be if she were to fall victim to the plague?

Elisia lifted the bottle to her breast, holding it close to her heart. What she was doing might be considered blasphemy by others of her faith, squandering some of the precious holy water on a killer and assassin. But it was the only way she could be sure, the only way she would ever know peace again.



**B**RUNNER GROANED as soft hands lifted his head from the straw pallet, as cold glass was pressed against his lips. The bounty hunter's eyes snapped open, staring into the sullen face of Elisia. The priestess glared back at him, hatred burning behind her eyes.

'I've come to finish it,' she told the bounty killer, her voice a low hiss. She pushed the bottle higher, letting its contents trickle into Brunner's mouth. The bounty hunter coughed as the cold waters worked their way down his swollen throat.

'Damn you for ever coming here,' Elisia spat as she withdrew the bottle. Already she could see the miraculous waters beginning their work, the redness in Brunner's eyes beginning to fade. 'I have squandered a precious gift on inhuman vermin when this hospice is overflowing with men and women worth a dozen of your kind.'

'Because I... I saved... your life?' the bounty killer asked. Elisia shook her head and turned away from him.

'Because I am too selfish to let you die.'



**P**ULSTLITZ GLARED UPON the white walls of the hospice, disgust and loathing welling up within his polluted form. The blessing of Nurgle, Lord of Pestilence, was a sacred thing, a divine gift handed down to men by the most powerful of the gods. Yet there were so very few who would accept that blessing, clinging to their tired old lives like rats to a sinking ship. The

cult of the goddess Shallya had arisen to feed on that foolishness, to drive the breath of Nurgle from the bodies of man. The Chaos champion gripped the hilt of his decaying sword. This would be more than a simple raid, more than slaughter in the name of the Dark Gods. For Pulstlitz, this would be avenging sacrilege, exterminating an affront to the god whom he served.

The plague champion directed his gaze to the ragged figures encamped outside the walls of the hospice. He could see the sickly green aura that seemed to hover over each one, the mark of the Plague God. These were men in whom the blessing of Nurgle had firmly established itself, beyond the power of the Shallyan priestesses to drive from their bodies. They were already claimed by Nurgle, already walking the road that would lead them to the Plague God's realm. But before that, they would serve Nurgle one last time.

Pulstlitz looked over to the brooding ranks of his warband – black-armoured Chaos warriors, ragged diseased mutants and cultists of the Plague God, and the furred shapes of goat-headed pestigors. The champion allowed their feral anticipation to wash over him, letting their eagerness to avenge this insult to their god fire his own ambition. He drew his rusted sword, filth sizzling upon the grass at his feet.

'Drive the rabble to the wallz!' the droning voice of Pulstlitz bellowed. 'Let them know we have come! Let them know Death iz here!'



**S**ABARRA STOOD WITHIN the old courtyard, sitting upon an upended barrel that had been cast aside by the priestesses when its contents had been distributed among their charges. The bounty hunter tried not to think about the sickly wretches lying all around him, focusing instead on the task at hand. The steel frame of his arquebus rested on his knees as the bounty hunter busied himself with scrubbing the inside of the barrel, removing any residual powder lingering within the weapon. It was a tedious, automatic task for Sabarra, and his mind did not need to concentrate upon his work. Instead, he

mulled over his arrangement with Brunner and the price on Riano's head. Every hunt had its dangers, but with the Red Pox all around him, Sabarra was quickly coming to the conclusion that the wealth being offered for Riano was not equal to the risk.

The sound of screams tore Sabarra from his labour. The bounty hunter turned his head in the direction from which the sound had come. It was repeated, and joined by others, becoming a cacophony of terror rising from outside the walls of the hospice. Sabarra jumped up, racing toward the narrow, cross-shaped windows that opened from the walls. He was swiftly joined by temple guards, priestesses and those supplicants still healthy enough to care about what was going on outside.

The bounty hunter's view was partially blocked by the frightened, ragged bodies of the sick rabble that had been camped outside the hospice, their dirty hands and boil-ridden faces filling much of the window. But there were infrequent views of other figures beyond them, the creatures that had put the fear into the rabble and driven them to claw at the walls, begging for sanctuary. Sabarra grimaced, for he had seen their like not long ago – the same sort of diseased, mutated scum he had helped Brunner fight on the road to Decimas.

The bounty hunter pulled away from the window, removing a small paper tube from one of the pouches on his belt, ripping it open with his teeth and pouring the blackpowder down the gaping mouth of his arquebus. Sabarra's hand rose to the belt of steel garros he wore, removing one of the deadly darts. But he hesitated as he prepared to pound the spike into the barrel of his weapon. He turned his eyes back to the windows, now completely filled by groping hands and desperate faces. He'd never be able to find a target with the rabble crowded so close to the temple. Whatever warlord led the Chaos vermin assaulting this place was crafty, herding the sick toward the walls to foil any archery that might be brought to bear on him.

The sound of frenzied pounding at the massive wooden doors of the hospice rose above the screams and cries for mercy. The sounds of terror grew louder from the direction of the door and were soon punctuated by other sounds Sabarra knew only too well. The sounds of blades cutting into flesh and men choking upon their own blood. Temple guards tore themselves away from the windows, hurrying toward the

doors. Several of the men put their shoulders to the portal, prepared to defend it against the coming attack.

The guards leaning against the door withdrew, screaming in mortal agony. Sabarra cringed as he saw the skin sloughing away from their arms where they had been holding the door, the links of their chainmail visibly corroding as rust gnawed at them. Behind them, the door was similarly being assailed, the aged wood beginning to crumble and crack as rot consumed it. Iron fittings fell to the floor, devoured by rust. Wooden panels cracked and warped, as though infested with fungus. Far quicker than the eye could follow, the doors aged and withered, at last crashing inward.

Armoured figures filled the opening beyond the door, grim shapes of steel and corruption, their faces hidden behind gruesome helmets. Beside them, leaning tiredly upon a staff of human bones, a goat-headed monster gestured proudly at its sorcerous handiwork. The armoured warriors paid the shaman little heed, striding forward across the ruined portal, crushing its rotten substance into dust beneath their feet.

One of the warriors lifted his sword, filth dripping from its edge, pointing it at those cowering before his approach. A wrathful voice droned from behind the warrior's insect-shaped helm. 'Make of thizz plaze a zacrement to Nurgle!' the monster's voice roared. 'Leave none alive!'

In response to the plague champion's wrath, three white-clad priestesses stepped forward, their voices lowered in a soft chant. Despite the severity of the situation, and the fact that in all likelihood he was going to die horribly in a matter of moments, Sabarra felt a sense of calm flow into him. The reaction of the Chaos warriors was markedly different. The armoured monsters flinched, taking several steps backward, seemingly repulsed by the soothing chant. The insect-helmed leader looked over toward his bestial shaman. The creature nodded its horned head and began to mutter in its own braying voice.

Almost instantly, the sense of calm began to fade as the beastman's dark invocation fouled the very air. The Chaos warriors strode forward once more. The few temple guards who had not been reduced to screaming husks by the decaying sorcery of the shaman rushed forward, interposing themselves between the five warriors and the priestesses. Pulstlitz waved his warriors

forward, content to allow them to slake their fury on the spearmen, just as he had been content to let the mob of mutants and pestigors bloody their blades on the rabble outside the walls of the hospice. The Chaos champion was interested in only one sort of prey, and with the few soldiers occupied there was no one to stand between himself and his prey.

Pulstlitz glared down at the white-clad women. They refused to open their eyes, concentrating entirely upon their sacred prayer. The plague champion snorted derisively. Sometimes the most satisfying things in life were also the easiest to acquire. 'Tonight, you zhall cower before my god and beg hizz forgivenessz!' Pulstlitz lifted his blade, pausing to savour the moment, then brought the polluted steel rushing downward.

The plagueblade stooped short of striking flesh, the sound of crashing steel ringing out as another blade intercepted it. A dull fire seemed to glow within the keen edge of Drakesmalice as the enchanted blade crashed against the polluted metal of the Chaos sword. Pulstlitz recoiled from the unexpected parry. He turned his insect-eyed helm to face the fool who thought to stand between himself and those who had profaned his god.

The brown sack-cloth of a supplicant hung about Brunner's pale figure, sweat dripping from his frame as he struggled to remain on his feet. The Tears of Shallya were posed of miraculous properties, but they were not able to instantly erase days of inactivity and fatigue. The plague champion chortled within his corroded helm. Here, perhaps, was a man worthy of killing, a soul that warranted being sent screaming to the Plague God. Pulstlitz nodded, then swung his foul blade at the bounty hunter's neck. Brunner intercepted the powerful stroke, turning it aside with a manoeuvre he had learned from a Tobaran duellist. The foolish man was skilled, Pulstlitz conceded, but he could not hope to fend off the plagueblade indefinitely and it would take but a single scratch from the infected steel to kill him.

However long their little struggle might last, Pulstlitz was certain of the outcome.

SABARRA LIFTED THE heavy arquebus to his cheek, his narrowed eyes considering the carnage unfolding all around him. The guards were almost all dead, but the plague warriors had been mobbed by a desperate pack of supplicants, their malnourished forms clinging to the butchers, slowing the armoured giants with the weight of their dying bodies. Closer at hand, the leader of the plague warriors had been engaged by Brunner. How Sabarra's rival had been able to rise from his sick bed, much less find the strength to wield a sword, was a problem Sabarra would worry about later. The Tilean was relieved that Brunner had stopped the insect-helmed monster, because he had a feeling that if the plague champion were to reach the priestesses, then no one would be leaving the hospice alive. There was another struggle going on, apart from the crash of swords. Gods were at battle here, striving against one another through their chosen priests.

Sabarra turned the arquebus toward the archway, where the twisted shaman continued to bray and moan in its grisly voice. Sickly green light gleamed from the monster's eyes. Sabarra muttered a prayer to Shallya, then put the smouldering hemp match to the touch pan of his arquebus. The weapon shook as the blackpowder ignited and the roar of the discharge overwhelmed all other sounds. Almost at once, the sense of soothing calm returned to Sabarra. As the echoes of the shot faded, the chanting of the priestesses returned, now strident and loud, as though the tones were a caged river flowing through a broken dam. The smoke began to clear and Sabarra was pleased to see the steel spike of his garro sheathed in the dead beastman's skull.

The plague warriors moaned as they reacted to the fading magic of their sorcerer. The loathsome runes carved upon their armour began to weep blood, and it was with painful, awkward movements that the monsters retreated back toward the archway. Outside, the frightened wail of the other plague creatures sounded, followed by the frenzied retreat of malformed shapes, slinking back into the comforting darkness of the woods.



PULSTLITZ SHUDDERED AS the protective magics of the priestesses surrounded him. Without the baleful power of the shaman to counteract the magic energies, the antagonistic energies wracked the plague champion. He felt the healing powers of the goddess entering him, sapping his strength and coordination. The plague champion lifted his blade to ward off the bounty hunter, but the move was too slow. Brunner's sword bit into Pulstlitz's hand, tearing through the corrupt armour. The steel gauntlet dropped to the flagstones with a crash, the plagueblade tumbling from its slack fingers. No hand filled the polluted glove, instead a mass of black-shelled cockroaches scuttled into the light, their hideous shapes crumbling as the hostile energies drove the corruption from their tiny shapes.

Pulstlitz, clutching the stump of his arm to his chest, retreated before Brunner. The monster gave a droning howl of fury, then turned and raced from the courtyard. Brunner watched him go, sagging weakly to the ground. He was not one to leave an enemy alive, but what strength had been restored to him had been all but spent during their brief duel. He had a feeling, however, that their paths would cross again, and that only one of them would walk away from that encounter.

Sabarra walked toward the Reiklander, crouching beside him on the flagstones. The Tilean looked Brunner up and down, a cold smile tugging at his weasel-like face.

'So,' Sabarra said, 'it looks like you're recovered. Suppose we have that little talk now?'



BRUNNER STALKED THROUGH the corridors of the hospice like a wolf on the prowl. He had mended his armour, wearing it now once more, his weapons again hanging from his belt. The last traces of the red boils were slowly fading away, sinking back into his skin. Miraculous was the only word to describe the fantastic elixir Elisia had given him. The bounty hunter saw the priestess crouched beside one of the pallets in the ward he had so recently inhabited. He strode down the

narrow path between the sick beds toward her.

Sabarra had been quite hasty in his departure, leaving Brunner to complete his recovery on his own. Brunner hoped that his rival was having a nice time in the little village of Montorri. He hadn't lied to Sabarra, Montorri was indeed where Riano's uncle lived. He had simply failed to mention that he no longer had any reason to believe Riano would be found there.

Elisia looked up as the bounty hunter's shadow fell across her, the hate undimmed in her eyes. Brunner respected that, a woman of principle and standards. It had been out of respect for that quality in her and what she had done for him that he had waited this long. The smart move would have been to act as quickly as possible, to reduce how much time Sabarra had to realise his mistake. Instead, Brunner had bided his time.

'How is he?' the bounty hunter asked. Elisia glared at him, wiping a lock of stray hair from her face.

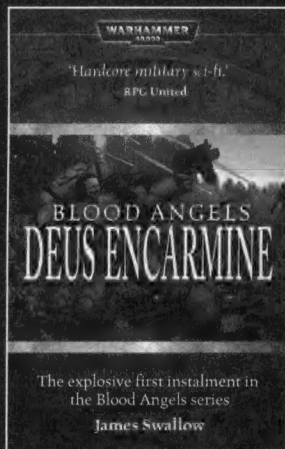
'What you have been waiting for has happened,' she told him, her voice as hard as the roots of the Grey Mountains. 'The Red Pox has won. He is dead.' Elisia smoothed the front of her robe as she rose to her feet. 'You are no better than a vulture, a jackal,' she spat. Brunner did not bother to contradict her, instead he stared down into the dead man's face, the face he had recognised when Sabarra had brought him into this room. The face of Riano. When plague had struck Decimas, the outlaw had fled here. If Brunner still gave any thought to the gods, he might have seen the workings of fate that he and Riano should meet by so strange a turn of circumstance. But the bounty hunter no longer gave much thought to gods, only gold.

'Have some of your people help me drag him outside,' Brunner told Elisia, his gloved hand closed about the massive serrated knife he had named the Headsman. 'That way you won't have far to carry the part I don't need.' X

The further adventures of Brunner can be found in *Blood Money*, *Blood & Steel* and *Blood of the Dragon*, by CL Werner. These three books are available from all good book stores.



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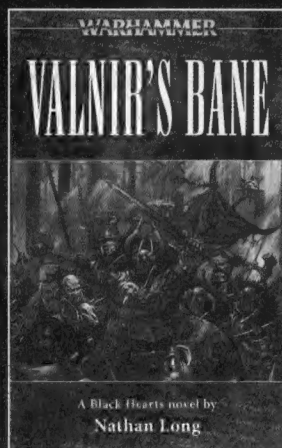
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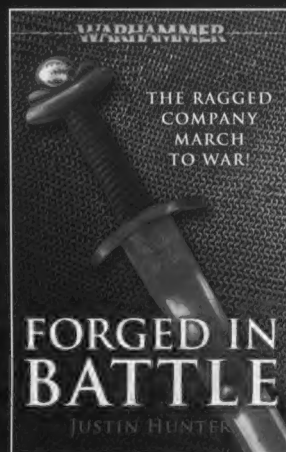
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Lelith closed her eyes and pushed her arms above her head, stretching her tall, gracefully curving body, laying full length as the thronelings rushed to form a bed, aching for a touch of her skin. Yhuki knelt at her queen's feet, biting down on her own tongue with her filed and sharpened teeth. A trickle of blood seeped out from the corner of her mouth, and she cast her tongue around her lips lasciviously.

• **HETZAU'S FOLLIES by Nathan Long**

*His sentence went unfinished, for with a horrible wet pop, the body's stomach erupted in a shower of rotting flesh and putrid viscera. Reiner and Hennig recoiled, instinctively covering their faces as they were splattered with clots of stinking flesh. Choking and blinded, they didn't at first notice that, mixed in with the reeking ejecta, were small snot-coloured creatures that skittered over the cart on tiny, malformed legs.*

• **GARDENS OF TYCHO by Dan Abnett**

Drusher crouched down beside the trooper's body and turned it slightly so he could look at the wound. The same clean, ghastly cut right across the face. But this time, a second one, abortive, made behind the line of the excising blow, as if the predator had been in a frenzy, alarmed, perhaps, and had made a first hasty strike before following it up. Even so the first strike, deep and into the side of the neck and head, would have killed Rimbaud outright.

• **SICKHOUSE by CL Werner**

*The warriors were huge, hulking monsters, their powerful forms encased within suits of plate armour, the steel pitted with corruption. Upon their breastplates had been stamped the mark of their deity, the daemon god to whom each of the corrupt warriors had pledged his life and soul. Three circles and three arrows – the mark of Nurgle, Grandfather of Pestilence and Decay.*

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